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**Experiencing learning across
academic-practice boundaries;**
An Interpretative Phenomenological
Analysis of Human Resource
Management practitioners engaged in
part-time postgraduate study

Helen Charlton

EdD

December 2016

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the
University of Northumbria at Newcastle for the degree of Professional Doctorate

Declaration

I declare that the work contained in this thesis has not been submitted for any other award and that it is all my own work. I also confirm that this work fully acknowledges opinions, ideas and contributions from the works of others.

Any ethical clearance for the research presented in this thesis has been approved. Approval has been sought and granted by the Faculty Ethics Committee on 22nd July 2013.

I declare that the word count of this thesis is 61785 words.

Name: Helen Charlton

Signature:

Date: 5th December 2016

Abstract

Human Resource Management (HRM) is a contested academic discipline and professional space, in which mid-career entry is not uncommon, and where study and professional membership are often key to career advancement. Subsequently, engagement with study while working full-time occurs frequently, commonly at postgraduate level. However, understanding of the student-practitioner experience is limited due to recognised gaps around research of part-time, taught postgraduate and mature student experience. This is an odd omission given that it represents a potential growth area following recent funding changes. This study explores these experiences in the context of constellations and landscapes of practice, focussing on issues of social identity theory and academic literacies within them.

Utilising Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to explore reflective accounts of the lived experiences of five practitioner-students in one Higher Education (H.E.) Institution, the study used an innovative focus group approach, combined with semi-structured interviews. Analysis was conducted through the development of case vignettes alongside thematic analysis supported through NVivo.

For all participants studying occurred during career transition, with studying for additional qualifications intended to validate this transfer. However, in the wider personal context of career and family, study had significant impacts, with complex negotiations involved around obligations to family and employers. Participants legitimised their membership of HRM communities through their wider practice experience. Practice experience was also used to delineate between other members of both their academic and practice communities, with individuals who demonstrated experience given preference. Participants' experience of education was characterised by comparisons between academic and practice communities, and negotiation of the boundaries between them was constant. Strength of practitioner identity affected alignment and approaches to studying. Engagement with discourse was also heavily influenced by dominant practitioner discourse patterns.

This study offers insight into particular experiences of H.E. which may align to other niche student cohorts, and contributes to closing the gap around knowledge of part-time, postgraduate and mature student experiences. It further adds to knowledge of communities of practice, constellations and landscapes and maps an example. It provides insight into how such students negotiate academic discourse engagement, and the impact balancing study with employment has on approaches to learning. Lastly, it applies this understanding to the support of practitioner-students learning across academic-practice boundaries, making recommendations to those facilitating these experiences.

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Table of Contents

Declaration.....	i
Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	v
Lists of Figures.....	xii
List of Tables	xii
1 Introduction	1
1.1 Key Aim of the Research	3
1.1.1 Aims and Objectives.....	3
1.1.2 Boundaries to the Research	4
1.1.3 Terminology	5
1.2 Context of the Research.....	5
1.2.1 Locating the Research Field in Context.....	5
1.2.2 Locating the Research Participants in Context	6
1.2.3 Locating Myself in Context.....	6
1.3 Conceptualising the Research.....	8
1.3.1 Conceptual Framework.....	9
1.4 Structure of the Thesis.....	12
1.4.1 Chapter 2 - Literature Review	12
1.4.2 Chapter 3 - Methodology.....	13

1.4.3	Chapter 4 - Analysing and Interpreting the Experience.....	13
1.4.4	Chapter 5 - Conclusions	14
2	Literature Review	15
2.1	HRM – a Contested Discipline and a Divided Community	17
2.1.1	HRM; A contested discipline?	17
2.1.2	Increasing Professionalism and Chartered Membership.....	20
2.1.3	The Role of Professional Education	22
2.1.4	Locating Academics Within the CIPD Community	24
2.1.5	Perceived Gaps Between Academics and Practitioners.....	25
2.1.6	Straddling the Gap - HRM Student Experience	27
2.2	Part-time, Mature and Postgraduate Student Experience	29
2.2.1	Part-time, Postgraduate or Mature; a Student Body Under Threat?	30
2.2.2	The Interactions of Personal Life and Education	31
2.2.3	The Interactions of Employment and Education	32
2.2.4	Scant Resources: Finance.....	34
2.2.5	Scant Resources: Skills and Structural Issues.....	35
2.3	Social Context of Learning	37
2.4	Communities of Practice; Popularity, Possibility and Critique.....	38
2.4.1	Conceptualising Communities of Practice	40
2.4.2	Classifying and Identifying Communities of Practice	41
2.4.3	Trajectories and Participation.....	42
2.4.4	Multiple Communities	44

2.5	Student Approaches to Learning and CoP	49
2.6	Boundaries and Multi-membership	52
2.6.1	Transitions Across Boundaries	55
2.6.2	Boundaries and Liminality.....	56
2.7	Identity, CoP and Education.....	60
2.7.1	Social Identity Approach	62
2.7.2	Social Identity Theory and Learning.....	64
2.8	COP and Discourse Practices in Academic Settings	66
2.8.1	Discourse Practices, Academic Literacies and Learning.....	67
2.8.2	Discourse Practices Across Landscapes	71
2.9	Conclusion.....	73
3	Methodology.....	75
3.1	Introduction	75
3.2	Phenomenology and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.....	76
3.2.1	Introducing IPA.....	77
3.2.2	IPA as a Phenomenological Approach	77
3.2.3	IPA as an Interpretive Hermeneutic.....	79
3.2.4	IPA as an Idiographic Approach	80
3.2.5	IPA and Other Interpretative Methods.....	80
3.2.6	IPA as an Analytical Approach.....	82
3.3	The Research Plan	84
3.3.1	The Original Plan	84

3.3.2	The Adapted Plan	85
3.4	Ethical Issues	89
3.4.1	Institutional Ethical Approval	89
3.4.2	Access, Sampling and Informed Consent	89
3.4.3	Privacy and Anonymity	91
3.4.4	The Avoidance of Harm to Participants	92
3.4.5	The Management of Data	93
3.5	Focus Groups as an Initial Stage of Data Collection and Analysis	95
3.5.1	Focus Groups and their Use Within IPA	95
3.5.2	Focus Group Development Within Research	96
3.5.3	Focus Groups as an Advantageous Technique	97
3.5.4	Focus Groups as a Problematic Technique	98
3.5.5	Focus Groups Utilising ‘Consensus Workshop’ Technique; Overcoming the Disadvantages, Retaining the Ideographic	99
3.6	Interviewing as the ‘Exemplary Method’ Within IPA	108
3.6.1	Interviews as a Constructed Reality	108
3.6.2	Interviewing Within IPA	109
3.6.3	Interviews as a Stage in This Research Project	110
3.7	Case Studies, Their Use as a Heuristic, and Their Place in IPA	110
3.7.1	Case Studies/Vignettes as an Analytical Process	111
3.7.2	The Case Vignette	112
3.8	Conclusion	114

4	Analysing and Interpreting the Experience.....	115
4.1	Case Vignettes.....	118
4.2	The Role of the Researcher in the Analysis.....	119
4.3	Theme One - Locating Part-Time Postgraduate Study in a Wider Personal Context.....	120
4.3.1	Why Locate Study Mid-career?.....	120
4.3.2	Locating Self as Experienced	121
4.3.3	Locating Self as an HRM Practitioner, or Not.....	123
4.3.4	Locating Self as a Student	124
4.3.5	The Implications and Costs of Locating Study Mid-Career	126
4.3.6	Relevance of Studying Mid-Career.....	128
4.3.7	Theme One - Summary	131
4.4	Theme Two – Locating Self in Landscapes of Practice and Constellations of Communities 132	
4.4.1	HRM Practitioners/Other Managers.....	132
4.4.2	Students	134
4.4.3	Academic Staff	140
4.4.4	Visualising the Observations of Others.....	143
4.4.5	Theme Two – Summary	145
4.5	Theme Three – Experiencing Academic and Practice Boundaries.....	146
4.5.1	Impacts of the Liminality of Study on Personal Identity	146
4.5.2	Observing Difference	148
4.5.3	Dealing with Differences	151

4.5.4	Theme Three – summary	155
4.6	Experiencing Learning – The Interactions of the Landscape	155
4.7	Discussion.....	158
4.7.1	HRM – A Discipline, a Community, a Profession.....	158
4.7.2	Part-time, Mature, Postgraduate Student Experience	160
4.7.3	Communities, Multi-Memberships and Identities.....	161
4.7.4	Learning Approaches, Discourses Practices and Academic Literacies.....	167
4.8	Conclusion.....	172
5	Conclusions	174
5.1	Introduction	174
5.2	Research Purpose.....	174
5.2.1	Aims and Objectives.....	174
5.2.2	Conceptual Framework.....	175
5.2.3	Research Design and Boundaries.....	176
5.3	Findings	176
5.4	Contribution to Knowledge.....	177
5.5	Quality, Validity and Limitations	182
5.6	Application to Practice	185
5.6.1	Theme One.....	186
5.6.2	Theme Two.....	188
5.6.3	Theme Three	189
5.7	Future Research	192

5.8	Reflection on Research	192
5.8.1	From the Participants' Perspective	193
5.8.2	From the Researcher's Perspective	194
	References	197
	Glossary.....	217
	Appendix 1: Interview Schedule Example.....	218
	Appendix 2: Emergent coding related to analysis themes	219
	Appendix 3: Extended Case Vignettes	220
	Appendix 3.1: Brian's story	220
	Appendix 3.2: Cal's story.....	222
	Appendix 3.3: Grace's story	224
	Appendix 3.4: Polly's story.....	226
	Appendix 3.5: Yvonne's story.....	229

Lists of Figures

Figure 1.1: Conceptual Framework.....	11
Figure 2.1: Conceptual Framework – Supporting Literatures.....	16
Figure 2.2: Conceptual Framework - Interactions of Personal Life, Employment and Studying	31
Figure 2.3: Fenton-O'Creevy <i>et al.</i> (2015a).....	48
Figure 2.4: Biggs (1989).....	50
Figure 2.5: Price (2011, 2014)	51
Figure 2.6: Marsick, Watkins and O'Connor (2011).....	51
Figure 2.7: Tynjälä (2013).....	52
Figure 3.1: Conceptual Framework – Relationship to IPA	76
Figure 3.2: Stages of Data Collection and Analysis	88
Figure 3.3: Consensus Process - First Stage	101
Figure 3.4: Consensus Process - Subsequent Stage	102
Figure 3.5; Consensus Process – Completed and Named Clusters (photo)	103
Figure 3.6: Initial Analysis of the Emergent Themes from the Focus Group Discussions.....	107
Figure 4.1: Conceptual Framework - Analysis Themes	116
Figure 4.2: Visualising the Observations of Others.....	144
Figure 4.3: Development of Fenton-O'Creevy <i>et al.</i> 's Model	162
Figure 4.4: Development of Presage, Process and Product Models.....	171

List of Tables

Table 3.1: Consensus Process - Completed and Named Clusters (Transcribed With Later Additions)	104
Table 4.1: Analysis by Theme.....	117

1 Introduction

The introduction of funding for postgraduate students, announced in 2014, and initially implemented in 2016 (Hubble and Foster, 2015) has the potential to trigger significant demand for such programmes. However, this potential growth also brings challenges, not least in the ways university staff support and engage with entrants to postgraduate study. While many students choosing postgraduate study are likely to be extending undergraduate studies, funding availability may potentially lead to a diversification of entrants, including mid-career professionals returning to study. This group is significantly diverse and represents a potentially considerable market. These individuals balance their study with ongoing careers, and have extensive professional experience. This study explores the experiences of some of these students in moving between academic and professional worlds.

Whilst it may be assumed that these students will benefit from study, some of the comments from participants in this research indicate that the experience of study can be negative. For example, one participant states that;

“... my husband is changing careers, so he’s decided to retrain... I said, whatever you do, don’t go the university route, you’ll find it so frustrating, at our age you will be completely disengaged” (Polly, focus group, 19min)

The causes of such dispiriting experiences are undoubtedly complicated, and bound up in the equally complicated lives of the individuals. Yet this comment, in conjunction with the assumption that further study is inherently a good thing, suggests that wider academic understanding of postgraduate experience is limited, something confirmed by several critics (Tobbell, O’Donnell and Zammit, 2008, 2010; Tobell and O’Donnell 2013) and our knowledge of the fragmented and fractional experience of the part-time postgraduate student is even more so. This thesis therefore sets out to respond to Butcher’s (2015) emphasis on the recognition of diversity and nuance in part-time student communities, by seeking to understand the experiences of one very particular student

community – that of a cohort of part-time postgraduate Human Resource Management (HRM) students. This study is located within HRM communities in part because of my own practice and academic experiences within this discipline, but also because HRM is increasingly using education at postgraduate level as an entryway qualification to the profession.

To help understand these experiences, the study is framed around the third stage of communities of practice (see Wenger-Traynor *et al.*, 2015) which moves conceptions of communities into higher education, and considers how practices, relationships and personal trajectories can be understood across both academic and practice settings. These distinct trajectories are starting to be explored, for instance by Fenton-O’Creedy *et al.* (2015a), who look at the multi-membership of part-time practice based students from both nursing and management. However, given that their emphasis is on nursing students, the experience of part-time management students remains out of detailed focus in this work.

The lack of attention to part-time management students suggests a need to return to Lee’s (2006, pp. 194-5), suggestion that ‘we need to understand much more about the lived experiences of today’s students and the importance of different communities of practice in the learning process, which challenge the simple notion of the novice student on the periphery of the central academic community’. Practice experienced students are far from novices within their own settings, but higher education can position such students as novices in the complex power relationships of the university. This study therefore seeks a more detailed understanding of one distinct disciplinary group, in one university setting, in seeking to expand our broader understanding of student experience¹.

¹ In the main body of the thesis I will introduce a number of acronyms which will then be used throughout the thesis. In establishing the initial context, however, I felt that using full terms, for the most part, would help readers unfamiliar with the context. For a full list of these, please refer to the glossary.

1.1 Key Aim of the Research

This thesis seeks to understand the experiences of practitioner-students, whose engagement in part-time postgraduate HRM study occurs while simultaneously employed full-time as an HRM practitioner. It does so through an engagement with appropriate literature into related fields, through primary research using focus groups and individual subsequent interviews, and through an analysis using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to develop illustrative individual and cross-cutting themes.

1.1.1 Aims and Objectives

This study set out to explore the lived experience of the interaction between parallel work and study environments and identities, with a particular interest in the experiences of engaging with academic writing. Over the course of the research this developed into a broader investigation of how these parallel engagements with practice and academia were experienced, focussing on learning across boundaries, the role of social identity, and the impact of these elements on learning and academic literacy engagement.

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of one cohort of part-time postgraduate HRM students, engaged in parallel work and study, and the interactions between their practitioner and student identities.

The objectives were to;

- Review appropriate literature around the related areas of HRM profession and education, part-time, postgraduate and mature student experience, communities of practice, approaches to learning, and the roles of identity and discourse practices in education, in order to inform the later analysis.

- Undertake primary research using focus group and individual subsequent interviews, conducted at the end of a three-year postgraduate qualification in one HEI, with a small sample of practitioner-students.
- Identify, through the use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, ways in which these parallel work/study experiences impact upon individuals and their membership of practitioner and academic communities, their learning and their engagement with academic literacies.
- Develop individual themes from the data which illustrate these experiences, and then underpin these themes with cross-theme analysis including case vignettes.

1.1.2 *Boundaries to the Research*

Throughout the research process, certain parameters were put in place to guide the process and ensure that it remained achievable. These included;

- Initially limiting recruitment of participants to those in full-time employment and part-time study. However, this was extended to include a further participant who had taken a career break to briefly study full-time and who then later joined the part-time cohort. This enabled an interesting comparison, and proved a valuable expansion of the sample.
- Limiting the study to one Higher Education Institution (HEI). As will be explored in Chapter 3 – Methodology, this had a significant impact on the design of this study, but mitigated the access and ethical issues of attempting to conduct a data collection across more than one HEI.
- Limiting the scope of the study to the aspects which are outlined below in the conceptual framework. Whilst there are multiple features of the lived experience which could, and do, fall under the parameters of how practitioner and student identities and experiences interact, in order to keep the research focussed and manageable, a focus on certain topics was necessarily taken.

1.1.3 Terminology

Throughout this thesis a number of technical and discipline specific terms are used, and a glossary is included to support a reader's understanding of these terms. One term in particular, however, requires an explanation. Throughout the thesis the participants of the research are referred to as 'practitioner-students', a term I have settled upon to reflect accurately the dual aspects of their lived experience. They are not 'student-practitioners', with an emphasis on the student foremost, but, as the chapters which follow demonstrate, identify themselves, and are recognised by me, as practitioners first, and students second.

1.2 Context of the Research

This research needs to be contextualised regarding the location of the research, the participants, and myself as researcher. While these are presented separately, they actually interact significantly, and emphasise my location and multiple identities in this context, initially as a student, then as an academic, and finally as a researcher.

1.2.1 Locating the Research Field in Context

As outlined above, an initial decision was taken to limit the research to one HEI. University X is post-1992 institution, located in the north of England, drawing its student population from the local urban community, but also across the UK, with a significant international student cohort. Within University X HRM has been taught, at both postgraduate and undergraduate levels, for a considerable time. Indeed, at the point at which I studied for my own Masters in HRM at University X, over a dozen years ago, there was, in addition to a healthy undergraduate HRM programme, both full-time and part-time postgraduate programmes, with the full-time programme having a cohort of approximately 40, split between home, EU and international students, and approximately a further 40 students across the three years of the part-time programme. The popularity of the full-time programme at that time may have been in part due to the provision of significant bursary funding for home students. When I returned to University X as a part-time academic about six years ago, the

full-time programme had shrunk to a cohort of around 20, but the part-time one retained an ongoing regular cohort of approximately 40 across the three years. By the commencement of the research, however, this had dropped to a cohort of 10, and, eventually, the part-time programme was withdrawn due to low numbers.

The part-time postgraduate route took three years to complete, with students taking two modules a semester. Their final research project ran across the whole of the third year. In comparison full-time students took four modules each semester. Depending on the module options offered, part-time students normally attended for an afternoon and evening, once a week, usually being taught as a discrete cohort, but occasionally alongside full-time students.

1.2.2 Locating the Research Participants in Context

The participants in this study, then, were drawn from a diminishing pool of part-time students. As will be explored more fully in the subsequent chapters (in particular in the Case Vignettes in Chapter 4, and in Appendix 3: Extended Case Vignettes), these individuals are located at transitions in their careers into roles within HRM, with studying a common feature of this transition. They are therefore both relative newcomers in HRM and academic settings, while holding expert locations or identities in their original career locations. Regardless, they are mid-career mature professionals. The research design, consequently, needed to recognise and accommodate their complex professional and personal lives.

1.2.3 Locating Myself in Context

This study would not offer a complete picture of the research context without the inclusion of an exploration of my position as a researcher.

I originally thought that the impetus for this study began when I first started teaching in HRM. However, in the writing of the thesis, I came to realise that it began much sooner than this, starting when I took a postgraduate HRM qualification. I had previously completed a professional HRM

qualification at a local further education college while working in an entry level role in HRM. After this I joined the full-time postgraduate programme, while one of my college peers joined the part-time cohort. By end of first semester I was coaching her. It seemed that while I 'got' the academic shift from college to postgraduate study, she was struggling, and yet we had very similar educational and professional experience. I can recall talking her through essays, explaining where I felt she was missing criticality, use of academic literature and so on. I found it straightforward, and yet she did not.

This was perhaps because I had a guide in that a member of my family was an academic. It might be that having a role model familiar with the environment supported me into understanding how HE, and assignments, operated at postgraduate level. If this is so, given that my peer struggled, there are implications for the kind of support offered to practitioner-students, as I discuss later.

Later, when I worked as the Head of HRM for a major regional arts organisation, I supported members of my team in undertaking postgraduate qualifications. In effect, this time I observed their experience of study while sitting in the practitioner space. What I noticed was that my team, all of whom I knew as competent, articulate professionals, seemed to find studying problematic. I coached them through their qualifications, and, as with my peer, observed similar issues with the transfer of practice experience into academic context.

When I had left my postgraduate programme I had been sure that I wanted an academic career at a later date, after a practice career. Having achieved my practice career aims much sooner than I expected, I began to teach the same professional qualification I had studied at college, while continuing in my full-time professional role. I noticed that my student cohort, studying an entry level part-time qualification while employed in a range of administrative roles inside and outside of HRM, seemed to have, again, the same issues. They were presumably competent professionals, and were able to discuss what occurred in work in my classes, but lacked confidence in the academic setting.

A year later I moved to University X, teaching on a module offered to both full and part-time students. I recall assuming that this would be different somehow, and yet, if anything, the students seemed to struggle more. My part-time students were clearly highly competent managers, often as experienced as I was, but found the academic context, especially the assessment regime, problematic.

After a further year I moved to my current role as an Academic Advisor, frequently working with professional students combining their employment with studying. Here too I could see similar experiences and struggles. This accumulation of observation suggested that there were underlying issues that would benefit from further analysis; particularly should it have the potential to transform the student experience for those involved in this particular combination of work and study. I began to think a great deal about my observations while studying for a postgraduate teaching qualification, but the limited amount of research I found did not quite answer my questions and growing concerns. This was the start of my research journey.

My journey across academic-practice boundaries, and dual role as a practitioner-academic are narratives and labels that I can articulate and comfortably adopt. The latter reflects the differing communities of practice to which I have belonged, and by which I locate and relate my own identity. I am an HRM practitioner, recognised by my peers, qualified by my Masters in HRM, and my Chartered Membership of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. I am also an academic, recognised by my peers, and qualified by both my Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, and as Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. I combine these both in this thesis, and bring this duality into my research.

1.3 Conceptualising the Research

In explaining my approach to research, it is helpful to consider its conceptual framework. Lesham and Trafford (2007, p.99) suggest that a such framework offers an 'integrating function between theories that offer explanations of the issues under investigation', providing a 'scaffold within which

strategies for the research design can be determined', which can then 'shape how research conclusions are presented by emphasising the conceptualisation of those conclusions within their respective theoretical context', thereby 'giving coherence to the research act'. As such, a conceptual framework provides a 'bridge between paradigms which explain the research issue and the practice of investigating that issue'.

With this in mind, what follows is an attempt to explain the conceptual framework surrounding this research project. This is located within an epistemological position of interpretivism and an ontological position of constructionism, embedded in an understanding of the individuals' experience of their own lived reality. This framework was therefore both informed, and was informed by, the research, acting as both inductive and deductive approaches. Punch (2000, p.22-3) suggests that the conceptual framework should address the 'what' questions of research and then the 'how' questions. Using Punch's (2000) model emphasises the deductive approach to this study, given its development from a specific research area and topic, through to the development of generalised and specific research questions. However, it also emphasises expansions and clarifications of the topic which arose from the data collection, which in turn inductively informed the conceptual framework. These are explored further below.

1.3.1 Conceptual Framework

The research began with a clear focus on the individual experiences of learning, located at a nexus of professional, academic and personal settings. Clearly an experience located within these settings will be both informed by each of these, and by the interconnections between them, given the participants roles as professionals, family members, and students. However, in each experience these interconnections and interactions were assumed to be likely to have a particular aspect, with the balance and emphasis between these unique to each participant, as each experience is individual, nuanced by the environment, and not generalisable. This individualised experience drove an approach utilising a phenomenological methodology, and in turn this led to Interpretative

Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which was felt to be an appropriate choice as it recognises and values individual lived experience. These choices are expanded on further in Chapter 3 –

Methodology

The literature which therefore informed this research began in the location of studies looking at HRM as a profession, and as an education discipline, and those of part-time, mature and postgraduate student experience. Alongside these an interest in the discourse experiences of students led to relevant literature and were further informed by studies looking at the interactions of work and study generally, and the limited studies looking at this specifically within HRM. This was expanded as it became apparent that the relationship between individuals within these settings was significant. Across these literatures, and the data collection, lay a golden thread of communities of practice, and this led to the development of the conceptual model used in the research.

This focus on communities of practice, and, specifically, landscapes and constellations of practice, reflects the multiple settings in which practitioner-students function. Alongside this, a social identity approach is used, as it informs our understanding of how we view others within those communities, while models of student approaches to learning locate education within the individual context, which for these students is complex and significant. Furthermore, discourse within communities, and within education, especially academic literacies, inform and influence the engagement possible in these settings. This leads to a conceptual framework located within concepts of situated learning and communities of practice, informed by discourse, social identity and wider understanding of mature, part-time and postgraduate learners, allowing for the exploration of learning situated within and across a particular landscape and constellations of practices. This intersection of concepts and evidence is discussed in Literature Review.

Combined these led to significant impacts within three themes, explored fully in Analysing and Interpreting the Experience. These are the location of learning in personal contexts, of self in context of communities, and of experience learning across academic practice boundaries. These clusters

interact to affect the landscapes of the learning across the academic-practice boundaries, set in the individual interactions of personal experience.

Together, these form the whole conceptual framework, as shown in Figure 1.1, overleaf. This shows the individual settings for engagement with study in blue. Around this lie the literature in orange, the methodology in green and the analysis in blue. The arrows indicate whether these are informing the understanding of the experience (i.e. the literature) or are driven by, or derived from, the experience (e.g. the methodology and analysis).

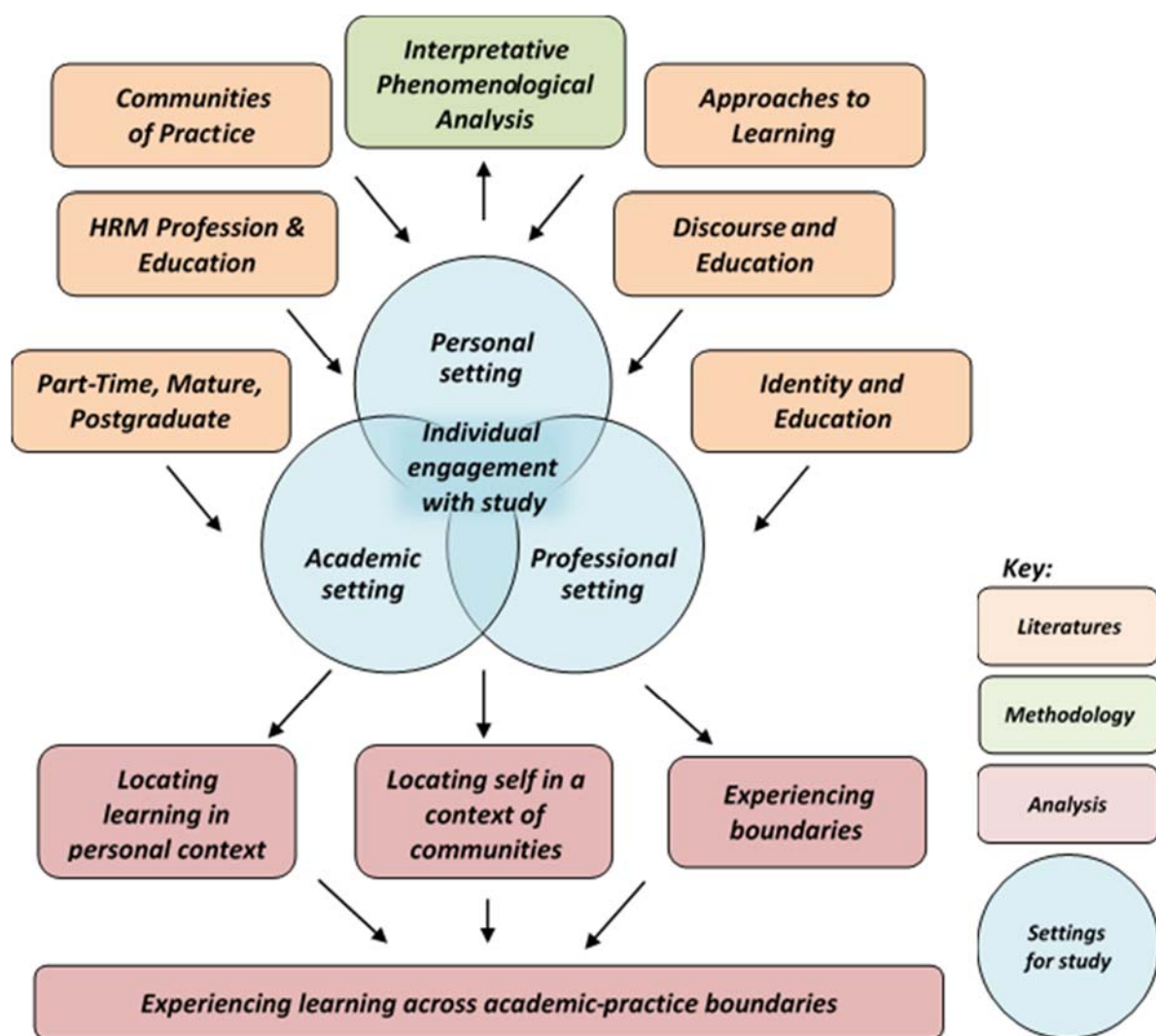


Figure 1.1: Conceptual Framework

1.4 Structure of the Thesis

This conceptual framework informs not only the approach taken, but the structure used within the thesis itself. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is normally presented with the analysis before the discussion of the extant literature (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.109) which it has been suggested maintains the double hermeneutic on which the approach is based from slipping into a multiple yet constrained hermeneutic driven by theoretical constructs (Nigbur, 2016). Instead, this thesis follows a more conventional placement of the literature chapter foregrounding the analysis in a conceptual framework, thereby informing the research, the researcher and the reader. This is then combined with a reflective commentary on the extant literature, identifying how the analysis contributes to the body of knowledge. However, the analysis chapter itself follows the usual IPA format, exploring the themes developed through a detailed exploration of each based on transcript extracts, providing an evidentiary base for the analysis.

1.4.1 Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Chapter 2, as suggested, provides an exploration of the extant literature around the conceptual framework, in two major sections. The first begins with an exploration of HRM as a discipline and a community, exploring the growth of qualifications as a marker of professionalisation within the profession, and the significance of Higher Education in satisfying this demand. Given the tendency for such study to be at postgraduate level, studied part-time by mature students in mid-career, there follows an exploration of the empirical research into these student experiences. The second section moves to a focus on the location of studying across academic and workplace boundaries. It begins with an overview of the concepts on communities of practice, and the complexities inherent in cross-boundary locations within constellations and landscapes of practice. This is followed by more detailed explorations of aspects of these models, firstly around identity in communities of practice, in particular the use of a social identity approach to conceptualise relationships between groups,

and the implications of discourse practices across communities and what this may mean for academic literacies.

1.4.2 Chapter 3 - Methodology

Chapter 3 locates the methodological choice in the conceptual framework of the individualised experience. It begins with an exploration of IPA as a vehicle for understanding individual experiences through a phenomenological and interpretive hermeneutic, detailing more explicitly the approach taken to the research, the accommodations required to reflect the changing situation and the approach taken to ensuring it is ethical. The chapter then examines the two data collection approaches, the first being an innovative group consensus approach which I have adapted to focus groups, aimed at the idiographic emphasis of IPA, while the second data collection uses the 'exemplary' method for IPA, semi-structured interviews. Finally, the chapter explores the analysis techniques used and the development of case vignettes to support the understanding of personal experiences.

1.4.3 Chapter 4 - Analysing and Interpreting the Experience

This analysis is then fully explored in Chapter 4. It begins with a summary of the thematic analysis process, and summarised versions of the case vignettes, while more detailed vignettes can be found in Appendix 3. This analysis is broken into three sections, starting with location of part-time postgraduate study within the wider personal context of these students, moving to how self, and others, are located in these landscapes and constellations, and finally, exploring the experiences of academic and practice boundaries. Each section is followed by an interpretative summary, and the interactions of these are then evidenced in the participants' experiences. This is reflected upon in the next section which relates the findings of the analysis of these three themes, and their interactions, to the wider extant literature explored in Chapter 2. Finally, these themes are brought together in the final chapter.

1.4.4 Chapter 5 - Conclusions

The final chapter offers a review of the overall research journey, beginning by returning to the purpose of the research, and summarises the findings. This is followed by a discussion of the contribution these make to knowledge, and the issues of quality, validity and limitations to the research. The research is then applied to the professional context, in particular offering a framework in which they can be applied to support similar students with transitions. The chapter concludes with a hypothesised reflection from the participants, and a reflection from my personal perspective, returning the research to its relationship with my own context, and the questions I began this journey with.

2 Literature Review

This chapter provides a contextualisation of both the situated experiences of practitioner-students of HRM, and those of mature, part-time and postgraduate students more generally, alongside the literature supporting discussions of Communities of Practice, and within these student approaches to learning, identity and discourse. This is a situated literature review, providing a framework for the exploration of the research subject. It is necessarily complex, as this research takes an interdisciplinary approach. My initial literature search led to three main sources of information. However, whilst this literature focused on the part-time student experience it didn't adequately explain the intricate nature of these students' experiences, so a wider review was undertaken. Consequent work led back through the main sources to the underpinning concept of Communities of Practice (CoP). This gave a unifying whole to the approach taken to the literature, especially in relation to the most recent phases of the development of the CoP model.

Hughes, Jewson and Unwin (2007, p.171) call for an understanding of the 'complex, interwoven societal contexts' of communities of practice, and the current chapter begins to respond to this call. The first focus is the setting where HRM as a profession is explored. There are issues here around what a credible professional identity might be in a profession where this remains in dispute, particularly given that it consists of multiple and disjointed communities. The second part of this chapter looks at the context of part-time, mature and postgraduate education, as these significantly inform our understanding of lived experience. It also addresses how such cohorts experience engagement with higher education, alongside their other commitments.

This review is then organised following Wenger's argument that the 'social configuration' of multiple communities 'must be understood in terms of interactions among practices' (1998, p.129). Wenger identifies four practices; boundary objects and brokering through trajectories and movements between communities, boundary practices and peripheral locations, the construction of identities, and the discourses which cross boundaries. The literature review uses this categorisation as a

structure to explore both the CoP literature and wider allied literatures. In doing so it first explores the development of the CoP model and then considers the role of multiple communities, described as constellations and landscapes, and the trajectories which occur within these. It next explores the experience of boundaries as locations of learning, relating these to wider theories of boundaries and liminal positions in education. From this, it moves onto the implications for identity regarding multiple communities, linking this to Social Identity Approach, partly due to its implicit role in CoP, and because it was previously used by Hallier and Summers (2011) to explore the experience of HRM academic and practice interactions amongst undergraduate students. Finally, the chapter will discuss discourse practices as a feature of communities, particularly the experience of academic literacies within education, drawing on Lea and Street (1998) and Northedge (2003a, 2003b).

The alignment between the differing literatures and the focus of the chapter can be seen to relate to the conceptual framework set out in Introduction, as follows.

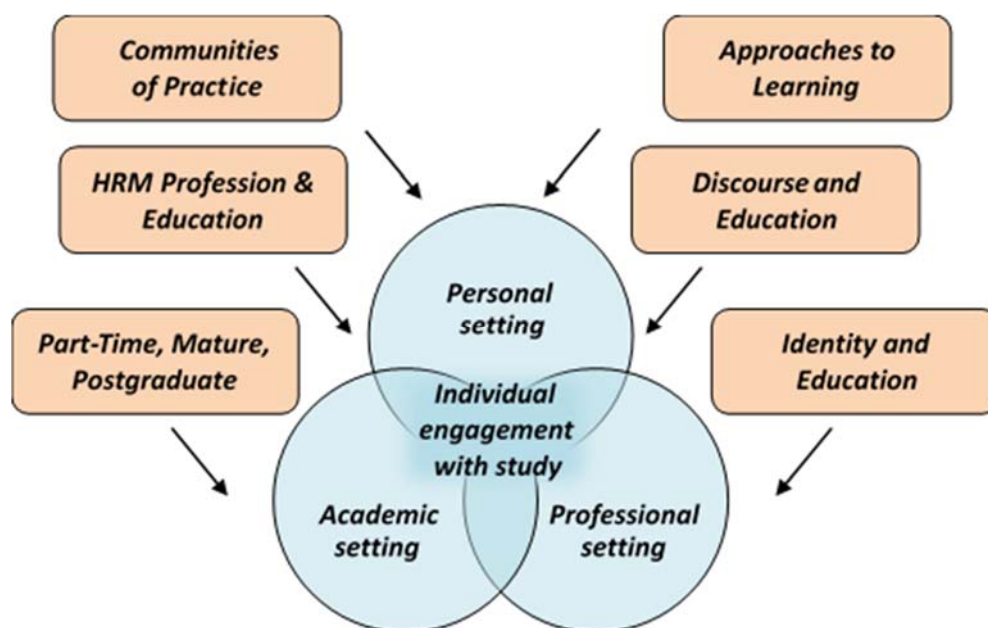


Figure 2.1: Conceptual Framework – Supporting Literatures

2.1 HRM – a Contested Discipline and a Divided Community

In understanding the context and experience of practitioner-students it is important to not only contextualise them as part-time and mature learners, but also as professionals and students within a disciplinary area. In part this is because Human Resource Management (HRM) is a problematic community in its relationships with wider management practice. There is uncertainty around whether it is a distinct discipline, or whether it is 'a managerial function redefining itself into a profession' (Higgins, Roper and Gamwell, 2016, p.286). Furthermore, in HRM communities, the practice functions of HRM and the academic disciplines that run alongside them are very varied. The role of the professional body for HRM within the UK is significant here. The Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development (CIPD), is engaged in the establishment of HRM as a distinct disciplinary community, and to support this, controls education programmes leading to relevant qualifications.

Firstly, an exploration of the contested nature of HRM generally as a profession is needed. There are debates around the contribution of HRM, but this is outside of the scope of this study, so the key topic here is the role of the CIPD in managing the professionalization of HRM. This is relevant to this study as much of this is being achieved through education and qualifications. The next subject for discussion is the apparent divide between practitioner and academic communities within the discipline. This is important because the students in this study are in the challenging position of straddling this divide.

2.1.1 HRM; A contested discipline?

HRM is a comparatively new profession, which has struggled to develop a clear professional identity and legitimacy. It began as 'personnel' in the 1960s (Marchington, 2015, Ulrich and Dulebohn, 2015) and became 'Human Resource Management' (HRM) in the 1980s (Marchington, 2015). The professional identity of HRM has long been in question (Farndale and Brewster, 2005, citing Legge, 1978 and Watson, 1977), not least for the reason that 'professionalism is a shifting rather than concrete phenomenon' (Gilmore and Williams, 2007, p.399).

This has to be seen in the wider context of management, which is not always seen as a profession itself (Leicht and Fennell, 2001, cited in Rynes, Giluk and Brown, 2007). The nature of HRM activity, frequently carried out by line managers, makes such an identity 'ambiguous' (Marchington, 2015, p.180). This ambiguity seems inevitable as, at present, around half of HR directors have migrated from roles outside the profession, and sideways moves between HRM and functional management are encouraged as helpful in 'developing the necessary skills to advance your career' (CIPD, 2015a, p.3). It is therefore unsurprising that HRM is often seen as a 'quasi-profession' (Stewart, Mills and Sambrook, 2015, p.165). The career paths of the students in this study confirm that entry to HRM from other roles is frequent.

Establishing a strong professional identity would perhaps resolve this ambiguity. The prevalent definitions of a profession are based on similar core set of traits, combining expertise and training, usually through university education, with form of professional association offering licence to practice and an ethical code (e.g. Leicht and Fennel, 2001, Rynes, Giluk and Brown, 2007, Brante, 2013, Wilkinson, Hislop and Coupland, 2016). Although such definitions have been seen as 'a sterile exercise' (Saks 2012, p.1) it is argued that they are key to understanding 'what professions are and how they operate'. In this, Saks (2001, pp.4-5) rejects the trait focus on knowledge and expertise, arguing instead for a neo-Weberian focus of 'the sheltered positions of professionals in the marketplace, with the entry to the professions... gained through obtaining higher education credentials', which he argues 'offers greater precision in delineating professional boundaries'.

This emphasis on licensing in trait models is problematic, excluding several occupational areas, which would consider themselves as professions, including HRM. For example, Denning (2001), calling for IT to be regarded as a profession, argues that professions can be identified by four 'hallmarks', of a 'durable domain of human concerns', codified principles based on conceptual knowledge, practices based on embodied knowledge, with 'standards for competence, ethics and practice'. More recently, Alvesson (2013) suggested that professions should also codify such

knowledge into autonomy within bureaucratic structures, wider social recognition and acceptance as a profession, and restrictions on entry which enable control of labour. However, Alvesson recognises this model would exclude both accountants and lawyers, traditionally regarded as professions, as they would not satisfy his first criteria, in that they are not based on scientifically developed body of theoretical knowledge.

Given these complex and at times competing definitions, it therefore becomes difficult to identify which disciplines can be recognised as professions. Brante (2013), drawing on an extensive study in Sweden, offers a threefold typology of classical professions, semi-professions and pre-professions. In this, classic professions arose historically, encompassing medicine, engineering, science and law. These classic professions provide the main body of research on professionalism, and have achieved such status having successfully closed entry to their fields.

Semi-professions arose through twentieth century, including teaching, social work and librarians. Over time, these 'semi-professions' have moved towards classical professional status, but are differentiated by a sub-ordination to another professional area, for example nursing, which holds a subordinate position to medicine generally (Brante, 2013, p.6). Such semi-professions are suggested as less autonomous, having a more inter-disciplinary education, and are less successful at closing entry. Under this classification, HRM could be seen as a semi-profession, having both an inter-disciplinary education, a subordinate role to management, and an incomplete closure to the profession. Interestingly, Brante (2013, p.7) notes the tensions which arise from this position, in particular between the academic training of such semi-professions and practice applications, a tension discussed herein.

Finally, pre-professions are a more recent arrival, comprising groups attempting to achieve professional status. They are found in specialised skill disciplines, encompass 'novel occupations and expert groups' (Brante, 2013, p.7), but are differentiated from semi-professions by the lack of professional bodies or certification. They are however increasingly moving towards this, in particular

in the increasing specialisation of occupational education. Brante (2013, pp.7-8) suggests these groups include the expansion of the medicine into marginal areas such as chiropractors, but also IT professionals, accountants, management consultants, and HRM professionals. As such, HRM can be argued to sit between these emerging professional areas, and the growth in professional bodies will increasingly blur the boundaries between these and the semi-professions.

In exploring this Higgins, Roper and Gamwell (2016) distinguish between the occupational professions, defining HRM as a managerial profession, using for this Evetts (2006) typology. In this the concern within HRM towards issues of autonomy and expertise have become key. Higgins, Roper and Gamwell (2016) suggest this arises in part from the lack of necessity of licencing for HRM practice, alongside the growth in professional membership, contrasting with the organisational power achieved by the specialism of core organisational functions. Similarly, the application of ethical codes by bodies such as the CIPD contrasts with the limited scope of autonomy achievable to some practitioners in organisations. This creates a contested space for HRM professionals.

As such, HRM may well 'increasingly meet [the] criteria' of a profession as one overseen by a governing body, with expectations of training and education, (Ulrich et al, 2013, p.1), leading to both Elias and Purcell (2004, p.70) and Higgins, Roper and Gamwell (2016, p.306) defining HRM as new or emerging profession. However, other authors suggest that HR 'struggles to define a body of knowledge that every practitioner should know' (Lawler, 2007, p.1034), implying a weakness in the control of the profession through specialist education and knowledge, despite the drive towards legitimacy through professional accreditation (Stewart, Mills and Sambrook, 2015, p.165). Given the significance of these for professionalism, it is perhaps in this context that the growth of the CIPD as the accreditation body for HRM in the UK, should be seen.

2.1.2 Increasing Professionalism and Chartered Membership

The development of HRM professional bodies is an international trend, reflecting a strong 'sense of a common identity ... [and] a desire to be part of a professional community' (Farndale and Brewster,

2005, p.43), and these are key to both professional identity and practitioner development. The CIPD represents around 140,000 members in the UK and is the leading organisation in this field (CIPD 2015 annual report). It is also the second largest international HRM body (Fardale and Brewster, 2005).

That the CIPD is the controlling body for HRM is indicated by their Royal Charter, which allows them to confer 'Chartered' status on members attaining postgraduate level qualification alongside professional experience, arguably leading to an enhanced standing for such members (Stewart, Mills and Sambrook, 2015). It is not surprising that for the majority of CIPD members the main focus appears to be professional recognition and qualification, with three-quarters of one survey suggesting this as the most 'highly valued aspect of CIPD membership' (CIPD, 2015b, pp.8-9). In 2012, another survey it was found that almost 75% of respondents considered CIPD qualifications to be 'vital for advancement in the HR profession' (Carty, 2012, online), but as 'only 1 in 3 people working in HRD in the UK is a CIPD member' (Philpott, 2013, online) the question of legitimacy remains. It is in this context that the students in this research enter postgraduate study.

Ensuring that membership comes through Chartered status is suggested to be an attempt at 'social closure within the area of personnel management... thus generat[ing] professional status for its practitioners' (Gilmore and Williams, 2007, p.409). A similar move can be seen in the perceived shift in emphasis towards the management aspect of HRM within the CIPD's 'map' of professional skills, which in turns drives curriculum for CIPD accredited programmes (Tosey, *et al*, 2014). This has led to a reduction in visibility for Human Resource Development (HRD), or Learning and Development, (L&D), a move which perhaps originated in the merger of the Institute of Training and Development (ITD) with the Institute of Personnel Management (IPM) to create the Institute of Personnel and Development (IPD), becoming the CIPD after the Royal Charter. This imbalance is of ongoing concern for many authors (for example, Tosey *et al*, 2014, McLagan, 2015), and is a shift reflected both in the prominence given to HRD in professional education and the experiences of our participants. These

concerns have driven much of the research available on HRD and HRM education, and so many of the insights which follow.

2.1.3 *The Role of Professional Education*

The role of education and qualification in the development of HRM professional identity means that the CIPD's involvement with identity extends into educational institutions. However, whilst the CIPD control many aspects of professional education, they are not the only influence. Although employers, their representative bodies, and employee representative bodies such as trade unions, have little impact on professional education, other bodies, such as the Government, exert influence through policies such as the Qualifications and Credit Framework and through the funding of academic work, as do academic institutions through the development and delivery of HRM programmes (Stewart, Mills and Sambrook, 2015).

Yet the CIPD holds sway, controlling professional education through the provision and accreditation of qualifications. Indeed, HRM/D education in the UK is noted as being under an 'increasing dominance' from the CIPD (Tosey *et al*, 2014, p.6), reflecting an international shift towards HR qualifications being run in conjunction with, or approval from, HR membership bodies. These are felt to hold high levels of legitimacy amongst students and practitioners (Farndale and Brewster, 2005). Accreditation is noted as the 'main demand from students' when selecting an award (Tosey *et al*, 2014, p.23), thereby driving the range and choice of curriculum within HRM. However, this accreditation requires compliance, as 'CIPD specifications represent the main content studied by HRD professionals' (Stewart, Mills and Sambrook, 2015, p.169), leading to a close hold on the content of such programmes.

Interestingly, there is no legal requirement for accreditation, from the CIPD or elsewhere, in order to practice, in contrast to professions such as medicine or accounting (Farndale and Brewster, 2005). All the same, CIPD accredited qualifications are the main routes for entry to the profession and there is a lack of alternatives such as apprenticeships or graduate schemes (CIPD 2015c). This is viewed as

‘closing off personnel roles, particularly at entry and junior management levels, to people who have not acquired, or are not prepared to acquire, [CIPD] graduate membership’ (Gilmore and Williams, 2007, p.411). The essential ‘credibility of graduate status’, is felt to be central to supporting the CIPD’s aims of attaining professional status for HRM (Gilmore and Williams, 2007, p.409). Such control of entry to the profession reflects Hughes, Jewson and Unwin’s (2007, p.173) assertion that professions are adept at policing the boundaries of their communities of practice, and helps to delineate the distinctiveness of HRM against broader management roles.

There are two recognised qualification routes, firstly ‘CIPD awarded’ qualifications under their direct delivery and secondly ‘CIPD approved’ qualification through other providers, including HEIs, FE and private training organisations. Both routes are offered at Qualifications and Credit Framework levels 3 (CIPD foundation level), level 5 (CIPD intermediate level) and level 7 (CIPD advanced level) (Stewart, Mills and Sambrook, 2015, pp.167-8). The latter gives access to professional Chartership, and it is this level that the students at the centre of this study are working towards. The dominance of such routes can be seen in Tosey *et al.*’s (2014) finding that over sixty percent of HRD programmes were CIPD accredited, of which the majority were HEIs, but the role for vocational colleges and private providers is also important, perhaps at lower qualification levels, for as Stewart, Mills and Sambrook (2014) found, these were the majority providers of HRM/D CIPD accredited programmes.

The main mode of study is through traditional models of attendance, typically part-time postgraduate study whilst in employment. However, there is some evidence that this is shifting, with a falling demand for such part-time HRM/D programmes being noted and attributed to a drop in employer funding (Universities UK, 2014, Stewart, Mills and Sambrook, 2015), an issue explored further in this chapter. In contrast there is a growth in undergraduate and full-time postgraduate programmes (Stewart, Mills and Sambrook, 2015, p.171). Falling numbers have occurred before, in the late 1990s, something which led to swiftly dismissed claims about the ‘death’ of HRM (Barber,

1999). However, entry to the profession remains predominantly through postgraduate level qualifications (Tosey *et al.*, 2014, p22) suggests that growth in undergraduate numbers is not particularly significant. These issues had an impact on recruitment for this study, as discussed in Chapter 3 – Methodology.

The growth of full-time provision might be seen as potentially limiting options for mid-career professionals, but all the same around half of the HRM/D programmes offered in 2014 were on a part-time basis, targeted at 'students who are already in employment, providing an opportunity for post-experience and work-related study in the HRM/D field' (Tosey *et al.*, 2014, p.14). These are usually delivered on a one afternoon/evening per week model. Thus the dominant mode of delivery remains a part-time postgraduate one. Alternative delivery modes have been 'slow to develop' and few providers offer block, distance or blended models of delivery (Tosey *et al.*, 2014, p14). Similarly, there are few multiple online open courses (Stewart and Sambrook, 2012). Overall, provision is very traditional and classroom based (Tosey *et al.*, 2014, Stewart, Mills and Sambrook, 2014) and part-time delivery on a one day a week attendance at a local university is the norm. Consequently, the role of academic staff in any HEI in the acculturation of these professionals into HRM becomes important. However, the relationship between the CIPD, as the professional body, and the academic community sometimes appears to be as troubled as the concept of HRM as a profession is.

2.1.4 Locating Academics Within the CIPD Community

On the surface it would appear that the CIPD has good links with the academic community, given that they cite a 'long history of partnering with academics from various disciplines to produce research that expands our knowledge and understanding' and which 'play[s] an important role in keeping us abreast of the latest trends and emergent theories in their respective fields' (CIPD, 2015d, p.15), but in actuality this is less straightforward, as academic roles in the CIPD community may be seen as side-lined. Tosey *et al.* (2014, p.7) emphasise that while the academic communities' role is one of being 'agents in the creation, maintenance and development' of the professional field,

academics' 'loyalty is perhaps greater to their academic identities than to their role as agents of the CIPD' (Tosey *et al.*, 2014, p.27). Similarly, Hallier and Summers (2011, p.206) comment that HRM academics are 'unlike "practised" or "practicing" teachers of medicine, engineering or other historically influential professionals', particularly in that they may not 'act simply as the socialising agents of the memberships or subject's professional values'.

These views may have appeared because the UK HRM academic community, which has drawn heavily on industrial relations and sociology, is felt to hold pluralist and critical perspectives (Marchington, 2015, p.177). In contrast, the CIPD's research and academic publishing arms are thought to be prescriptive and unitarist, serving its own managerialist viewpoint (Gilmore and Williams, 2007). Given this, debates within the academic professional communities are quite different from the normative, unitary and unquestioning nature of CIPD activity. This pluralist, critical nature of academic discourse appears to have created a gap between the two types of institution.

2.1.5 Perceived Gaps Between Academics and Practitioners

The gap is felt to exist by the HRM practice community more generally. Authors comment that academics and their research findings are ignored by practitioners and also that academics have lost touch with the actual practice of HRM. However, despite the longevity of these kind of comments, the extent to which they are founded in reality, or not, is debateable. This complexity is echoed in the causes to which the gap is attributed. Since a gap between practice knowledge and the academic community is a feature of professional education and business education (Personini, Cruz and Wood Jr, 2015; Rynes, 2007), the suggested existence of 'very separate worlds' between HRM practitioner and academic publications in both the US (Rynes, Giluk and Brown, 2007, p.987), and UK (Guest, 2007) is not surprising.

Early HRM research, located in the practice setting and written by practitioners or academics who were strongly linked to organisations through consultancy, was criticised for its lack of rigour, and

this led to an increasing emphasis on theoretical complexity (Bartenuck and Rynes, 2014; DeNisi, Wilson and Biteman, 2014). This critique resulted in a drop in practitioners publishing in scholarly journals and a perception by practitioners that research was not aligned to organisational practices (DeNisi, Wilson and Biteman, 2014 citing Cascio and Aquinas, 2008 and Rynes, Colbert and Brown, 2007). This emphasis on theoretical publication appears to have had a twofold effect, both reducing the validity of practitioner publication as ‘the suspicion is that if it can be translated into material for a practitioner journal ... then it may not be good academic research’ (Lawler, 2007, p.1035) and making academics ‘fearful of attempting to move from purely academic publishing domains’ (Rynes, Giluk and Brown, 2007, p.1000). Further, practitioner publications came to focus on business affairs, offering ‘information of interest and relevance to their readers’ (Guest, 2007, p.1020), leading to faster publication cycles out of step with the slower pace of academic publication (Bartenuck and Rynes, 2014). This distancing of academic and practitioner is perhaps reflective of James’ (2007) observation about the complexities experienced by practitioners entering academic communities, and the way this may destabilise allegiances to communities of practice.

The results of the perceived gap include two different styles of writing, and an assumption that practitioner and academic are not speaking the same language. Deadrick and Gibson (2007, pp.136-7) found that professionals were interested in different topics to academics, leading to professionals being unaware of research findings. They urged ‘HR academics [to] learn to write in practice-based language and HR professionals [to] learn about research findings’, and in this way bridge the gap ‘from both ends’. The gap, however, may be seen to exist not just in styles of discourse, but also in content, partly attributed to the applicability of academic research to practice. Cohen (2007) suggests that the inherent business content knowledge of practitioners plays a significant part in the adoption of theoretical research, and that researchers should demonstrate clear business cases for adoption, while journals should require the inclusion of sections which outline practitioner applications. Typically, HRM managers seek knowledge from managers in similar organisations rather than from theoretical research (Rynes, Giluk and Brown, 2007), and the ‘adoption of new

practices ... [is] put down to judgement based on implicit knowledge' given that 'local knowledge about what constitutes best practices are most valued' (Guest, 2007, p.1023).

However, Bartunek and Rynes (2014) have sought to reframe the gap, not as caused by differing interests, but as structurally created. They found that while the number of journal articles discussing the gap had grown considerably in the last 20 years most of the articles were based on opinion, in the inward turn in practice, not empirical research. Bartunek and Rynes (2014) also attribute the perceived gap as based, not in the distance between academics and practitioners, but as a reflection of differences between groups of academics themselves. In this the paradox becomes not the existence of the gap but the causes of it, given that 'the compatibility and incompatibility of academics and practitioners and the tensions that express the incompatibilities are each logical when viewed separately, but irrational when juxtaposed' (p.1191). They attribute such incompatibilities as arising from issues of belonging and performing, in which belonging relates to 'individuals with memberships in a particular group whose understanding of themselves differ from their understandings of other groups. Individuals belong to a group or community of practice which agrees that academics and practitioners are incompatible ... [or] ... compatible. It is often through this belongingness that individuals gain their identity as scholars or practitioners' (pp.1191-2).

It seems clear that the identity and communities of HRM practitioners and academics are multiple, in structural and discursive terms, multi-faceted and complex, and that the interactions and locations individuals find in identity and community are therefore similarly complex. They have much in common with the issues of constellations of communities, belonging, discourse, power and identity which are explored later in this chapter.

2.1.6 Straddling the Gap - HRM Student Experience

Given this fragmented relationship between practice and academic settings, it might be assumed that a similarly troubled relationship could exist within our participants as individuals, professionals and students, straddling as they do the divide between practitioners and academics. What is known

about concurrent HRM employment and study certainly suggests a significant interaction. Hallier and Summers (2011), discussed later in this chapter, provide some insight into undergraduate student experiences of HRM, in particular the impact of concurrent study with employment, albeit in relation to a limited twelve-week placement. In other studies, a lack of practice based experience was felt to result in 'gaps and insufficiencies in students' prior knowledge [that] make it difficult to get students to participate' (Coetzer and Sitlington, 2014, p.224). This perhaps links with what Cho and Zachmeier (2014, p.14) found, which was that there were 'strong opinions regarding the experience and maturity necessary for HRD students' and assumptions that it is 'difficult to teach to young students' and that such study 'may not even be appropriate for those without work experience'.

Learning within a community may serve to counterbalance such claims, as students within a cohort will have differing levels of experience. This would reflect HRM professional development, given that an emphasis on the significance of learning from experienced peers is evident (Bailey, 2015), while on HRM modules inside MBA programmes students express a desire for practical content that is directly related to the workplace (Sambrook and Wilmot, 2012). This research suggests that despite the perceived gap, participating in both practice and academic settings is significant and valuable for tutors and students. Practitioners with extensive practice knowledge, do, after all, take significant gains from studying.

The lack of research around students' experiences is surprising, given the extent of the focus on academic and practice professionalism, and the location of professional education in a mid-career, part-time, traditional delivery model. Research into the teaching of aspects of HRM is 'extremely limited' (Coetzer and Sitlington, 2012, p.231), and a similar dearth exists within HRD (Zachmeier and Cho, 2014). Indeed, Zachmeier and Cho's (2014) systematic review of HRD literature found that in 70 articles, issues around student experience make no appearance. They also said that teaching and learning methods are infrequently covered. Further, Tosey *et al.* (2014, p.6) argue that student

centred research is ‘currently underdeveloped’. Literature searches on ‘Human Resource Management’ and ‘higher education’ return results which focus on the application of HRM practices in HEIs, not on pedagogic issues. Therefore, to explore this issue more fully, this chapter now turns to the wider literature around part-time, mature or postgraduate student experience.

2.2 Part-time, Mature and Postgraduate Student Experience

Whilst it is reasonably straightforward within HRM to define what the ‘normal’ part-time postgraduate experience might be, there is little written about actual HRM student experience. To help understand this, the literature about similar student cohorts was explored. Students on Masters of Business Administration (MBA) programmes may also be mid-career part-time students. Likewise, part-time students may also be mature, and postgraduates are also noted as frequently mature, as well as part-time. This tentative information flags up the lack of clarity in the research available regarding these differing cohorts of practitioner-students like these.

Despite the recognition that ‘part-time study is distinct and not necessarily synonymous with “mature students” or “continuing education”’, (Williams and Kane, 2010, pp.184-50), delineating between the part-time, mature and postgraduate communities is difficult, particularly the ‘line’ between full and part-time, or the definition of mature students (Butcher, 2015, also Williams and Kane, 2010, citing HEFCE, 2009). Further, some note that increasing numbers of mature full-time undergraduates mean they have more in common with part-time students (Dunne, 2016). One common demarcation between full and part-time is number of hours but this fails to ‘capture the nuances’ of the multiple arrangements that exist (McLinden, 2013, p.8), or recognise that the assumption that all part-time experience is the same is ‘flawed’ (Williams and Kane, 2010, p.185).

This lack of clarity may contribute to the lack of exploration of these students’ experiences. There are few studies of part-time student experience, even within the undergraduate level where they represent a significant proportion of the student body (Callender and Wilkinson, 2012, p.13; Callender and Feldman, 2009, pp.4-5; Davies, 1999, p.142). Similarly, there is recognised absence of

research into wider postgraduate experience (Tobbell, O'Donnell and Zammit, 2008, 2010; Tobell and O'Donnell 2013), mature age postgraduate student experience (Jancey and Burns, 2013), and a 'serious dearth of empirical research into part-time MBA program[me]s' (Prince et al, 2015, p.208), the cohort most similar to participants in this study.

Indeed, studies generally focus on postgraduate research students, leaving taught students to become a 'forgotten part of the sector' (Morgan, 2015, p.236, citing the Higher Education Commission, 2013), an absence which Tight describes as a 'curious' (2003, p.96). This omission may be more understandable given the lack of publically available institutional level survey data for postgraduate students, in comparison to the 'league table' focus on undergraduate student experience. To locate the students in this study within an uncertain field, it is needful to explore the extent of this wider student body, and the interactions within it, where combining personal commitments with study and employment leads to challenges and compromises around the scant resources of time, money and support.

2.2.1 Part-time, Postgraduate or Mature; a Student Body Under Threat?

Alongside issues of definition, the number of part-time postgraduate mid-career students is difficult to pin down, despite the significant extent of part-time provision in the UK, with over 540,000 part-time enrolments in 2015-16 (HESA, 2017). Since 2000 however, there has been a declining pattern of part-time provision generally (Dunne, 2016; Callender and Wilkinson, 2012). This has been particularly dramatic in undergraduate part-time students, with a drop of 55% following changes to undergraduate funding (Dunne, 2016; Callender, 2015), although the pattern is inconsistent across the different UK sectors, reflecting differing national governmental policies (Butcher, 2015). These falls have had a supposedly disproportionate impact on lower socio-economic groups (Butcher, 2015, p.5), which is concerning, but are possibly less relevant to the mid-career postgraduate market.

However, numbers of postgraduate students, both full and part-time, have also experienced a shift since 2011/12 (Morgan, 2015), so whilst postgraduate numbers are static the percentage of part-time students is dropping (Dunne, 2016). As noted earlier, the drop in employer funding for postgraduate courses, especially HRM, has exacerbated this decline in numbers. It is in this situation of declining yet still quite significant numbers that the importance of understanding the student experience is located.

2.2.2 *The Interactions of Personal Life and Education*

Unsurprisingly, part-time study causes conflict when balancing multiple roles, and while it may be assumed that study is ‘something which can be engaged in alongside... another major role or roles... in everyday lives’ (Tight, 1991, p.2), it is these other roles which are the most common reason for selecting part-time modes (Yorke and Longden, 2008). McLinden (2013, using HEFCE, 2013 data) notes the distinctive range of wider life commitments of part-time students, arising from their mature status. Such multiple commitments are thought to be reasons for part-time modes of study, either as economic pressures require full-time employment or preclude full-time study, or to enable flexibility around other commitments (Butcher, 2015; Callender, Hopkin and Wilkinson, 2010). Figure 2.2 below suggests how these intersecting commitments may be conceptualised.



Figure 2.2: Conceptual Framework - Interactions of Personal Life, Employment and Studying

In this context achieving any balance between roles as student, employee and family member is often difficult (Williams and Kane, 2010, p.208) and sacrifices may have to be made (Kember, 1999; Kember and Leung, 2004). Butcher (2015, p.27) states that one mature part-timer in their study discussed 'what he termed the virtually impossible conundrum of missing aspects of his child growing up against a commitment to his part-time [undergraduate] degree', a balancing act which made a social life impossible. This is troubling, as family, friend and work relationships are very important in supporting part-time mature students through study (Kember, 1999; Askham, 2008). Postgraduate student lives are equally difficult with Tobbell, O'Donnell and Zammit (2010, pp.269-71) noting that full-time students, who 'had partners, children and perhaps part-time jobs were particularly time poor', while the balances struck by their part-time peers are felt to be particularly costly (Anderson, Huggins and Winfield, 2015, pp.47-8).

Clearly, for these students, balances between study and personal life are played off against employment, so much so that part-time postgraduates who also work part-time hold particular admiration for those juggling postgraduate study with full-time employment (Butcher, 2015, p.28). As such mid-career students' balances may be particularly acute, given that Bruce's (2010) study of part-time MBA students found that work/life balance issues, alongside general employment satisfaction, rather than any aspect of their study, impacted most acutely on their overall satisfaction. Understanding this experience necessitates looking at the interactions between employment and study.

2.2.3 The Interactions of Employment and Education

The relationship between studying and working is complicated and not always mutually beneficial. Just as personal commitments impinge on studying, working will also do the same, often to quite a large extent, and whilst students may hope that study will improve their career prospects, it may not always be the case. Complex balances between work and study are a characteristic of most student lives, for while part-time students are likely to work on a full-time basis (Callender and Feldman,

2009; Kember and Leung, 2005), and so-called full-time students are often 'part-time students and part-time workers' (Curtis and Shani, 2002, p.129). This has positive and negative impacts.

Supporting employability, for instance, (Shaw and Oglivie, 2010; Cheng and Alcantara, 2007), is offset by negative impacts on study (Hall, 2010), leading to suggestions of limits to working hours (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006; Cheng and Alcantara, 2007), something which also holds at postgraduate level (Tobbell, O'Donnell and Zammitt, 2010, p.272). More significantly at postgraduate level, Carroll, Ng and Birch's (2009) Australian study of distance learning business students, presumably with concurrent employment, identified that the consideration of work pressures was much more important than in other student populations, suggesting that for those who are also working, the balance is more complex, and is likely to have greater impact.

One of the motivations for tackling such complex balances is probably the prospect of the career opportunities that may follow. Part-time students study to develop their career (Yorke and Longden, 2008), and this is the motivation for 70% of part-time postgraduates (Leman, 2016). Mature learners in particular enter HE with a 'clear career goal in mind' (McVitie and Morris, 2012, p.35) and it is suggested that postgraduate study is 'increasingly undertaken for career advancement rather than self-fulfillment' (Morgan, 2015, p.234). This may explain why part-timers are likely to perceive greater benefits from study (Jamieson *et al.*, 2009, p.259), an assertion supported by the finding that the two most valued benefits of studying part-time for mature learners are personal development and career related qualifications (Universities UK, 2013).

This may not amount to a simple balance of study and career development however, as while part-time MBA students experience increased salaries, promotions and changes to their job role (Personini, Cruz and Wood Jr, 2015) they also hold a poorer view of the economic impact and relative worth of their MBA than their full-time counterparts (Bruce, 2010, pp.38-44). Anderson, Huggins and Whitfield (2015, p.45) additionally sound a note of caution, as they found that such students had a 'complex mix of personal and professional motivations' often feeling compelled to

study for professional gain; and they argued that ‘the majority of professionals do not undertake a masters degree because of their love of learning’, leading, potentially, to resentment.

Resentment could also be caused by employers failing to recognise the professional and educational development of these students, with Lester and Costley (2010, p.569, citing Gustavs and Clegg, 2005) noting that a ‘significant amount of unpublished and anecdotal evidence’ exists around work based learners changing or leaving employment as a consequence of study, at times because their developing skills have not been recognised or capitalised upon. Similarly, part-time postgraduate students have been noted as having left employment when their studies have not led to promotion (Webber, 2004), and in O’Connor and Cordova’s (2010) research around mature part-time students with full-time employment all the participants changed role while studying. As such the potential positive impact between study and employment may only occur in settings where study is recognised and valued by the employer as much as it is by the student.

2.2.4 Scant Resources: Finance

The economic issues of engagement with higher education are significant for part-time students (Davies, 2001), but this is perhaps yet more acute when viewed alongside the well-documented costs to personal and professional lives. The shift in 2012-13 from grant funding to student loans for undergraduate part-time study has led to falling numbers (Dunne, 2016; HESA, 2015, 2017), perhaps as a result of employers, a key funder in this market (Yorke and Longden, 2008; Universities UK 2013; McLinden, 2013) feeling ‘excused’ from supporting employees due to the availability of loans (Dunne, 2016; Universities UK 2013). Reduced funding sources are seen as the cause of much of the decline of part-time study (Butcher, 2015), but this research does not delineate between undergraduate and postgraduate, or between students who are supported by employers and those who are not, leaving a complex, yet still incomplete, picture of falling undergraduate part-time provision.

For postgraduate study, where grant funding has not existed for some time, the impact of postgraduate loans has been harder to predict, and the complex funding environment for these studies has been felt to be a barrier to participation (Tobbell and O'Donnell, 2015). Prior to postgraduate loans being available, parental funding held dominance, followed by savings or salary (Morgan, 2015). However, this study looked at the whole postgraduate market, and as such does not reflect mode of study, or mature student population, who seem more likely to rely on sources other than the 'bank of mum and dad'. However, it is hard to predict what eventual impact the introduction of such loans may have, in particular as they may impact differently upon part-time programmes, given the restriction of funding to the first two years (Prospects, 2016), when many part-time programmes take three years to complete.

Interestingly, in Morgan's (2015) study, employer funding appears to have been unmentioned, despite around half of part-time postgraduate students being funded this way (NUS, 2010). This is also an odd omission as employer funded part-time students gain more from study (Jamieson *et al.*, 2009, p.258; Callender and Feldman, 2009, p.21), and such support is thought to have positive implications for the relationship between employer and employee/student (Shaw and Oglivie, 2010, p.809). Indeed, Prince, Burns and Manolis (2014) found that MBA students became more engaged with their employers, partly as a result of strengthening relationships with colleagues. Support provided to part-time postgraduates may increase engagement with an employer, but what is not clear is how it strengthens relationships, or how a sense of obligation may be balanced with the other commitments and aspirations of these students.

2.2.5 Scant Resources: Skills and Structural Issues

Given the complexity of these students' lives, how do universities respond? Whilst transition plays a significant role for all students, for these cohorts it can be very acute, as they can lack confidence (NUS, 2010; Anderson, Huggins and Whitfield, 2015), something which can be compounded by incomplete induction processes (Tobbell, O'Donnell and Zammitt, 2010, p.275), perhaps due to an

assumption that as postgraduates, they are already competent in the academic arena (Tobbell, O'Donnell and Zammitt, 2010; Anderson, Huggins and Whitfield, 2015).

The area of skills support for postgraduate taught students is another under-researched one (Hallett, 2010), despite the need for, and appreciation of, additional support with their academic skill development (National Union of Students 2010; Lester and Costley, 2010). Whilst support may lead to an over-dependency on tutors (Anderson, Huggins and Whitfield, 2015), perhaps linked to a student's lack of confidence, the role of academic staff in supporting student engagement with the academic community is key. Askham (2008) found that academic support, particularly through feedback processes, was central in addressing the challenges students found in meeting requirements such as word limits, and referencing. Meanwhile, Hallett's (2010) study found that part-time postgraduate students sought support in library skills, academic writing, and understanding assessment tasks, again with a repeated emphasis on referencing. Indeed, Hallett's discussion foregrounds the role of teaching staff in relation to developing student engagement with an academic community.

The need for support extends into all aspects of university culture. Structures designed for full-time students fail part-timers (Penketh and Goddard, 2008; Anderson, Huggins and Winfield, 2015), and there is an 'assumption that part-time students can be accommodated on programmes designed for their full-time peers' (McLinden, 2016, p.26 citing Yorke and Longden, 2008). While teaching staff may be sympathetic to working students' needs, university structures are often not (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006, pp.31 -33, also citing Curtis, 2001). Both McVitie and Morris (2012) and Williams and Kane (2010) suggest that part-time students also need more consideration around timetabling, given their complex wider commitments, but despite this research, a lack of 'personalised and responsive' flexible approaches for part-time students exists (Butcher, 2015, p.22). An interesting adjunct of the observation of inflexible, 'one size fits all' university systems is Butcher's suggestion that this raises 'the potential for mature part-time learners becoming more assertive 'customer's' –

especially if inflexibility extends to a failure to acknowledge or draw upon the professional skills mature part-timers may bring with them' (2015, p.30). This suggests that dissatisfaction with the learning experience may arise for such students, not from the course they study, but from the structure and support from the overall university.

2.3 Social Context of Learning

In understanding the experiences of practitioner students it is important to recognise the contexts in which they sit, and it is to this question this literature review now turns, with an emphasis on social contexts of learning and of Communities of Practice (CoP).

Situated learning theory positions learning as occurring in relational and negotiated locations, embedded in the social groupings in which individuals interact. Wenger (2008, p.216) acknowledges that situated learning is only part of learning, recognising the importance of 'biological, neurophysical, cultural, linguistic and historical developments', but sees learning as socially located, related to competence and participation in valued enterprises, and directed towards meaning.

Wenger (2008, p.217) further suggests that situated learning builds upon psychological theories, which, over time, have moved towards socially located understandings of learning. Earlier, learning was seen as behavioural change (i.e. Pavlov, Skinner) then as cognitive understanding and information processing (i.e. Dewey). Situated learning is perhaps more closely related to the models of learning of constructivism (i.e. Piaget), which pays attention to the construction of knowledge in the environment, and depicts the teacher as a guide. However, it is especially close to social learning theories and socio-constructivism (i.e. Bandura and Vygotsky), in their focus on learning within social contexts and as an interaction between individuals and social settings.

This move towards socially focussed understandings of learning is suggested by Fuller (2007, p.18) to arise from a 'dissatisfaction with the ability of more traditional theories such as cognitivism and behaviourism adequately to account for how people learn in formal and non-formal educational

settings'. However, Wenger's (2008) recognition of situated learning as only part of learning calls to mind Illeris' (2002) view of the interactions between cognitive and dimensions of learning being founded on the social context, with significant positive or negative impacts arising from societal conditions.

2.4 Communities of Practice; Popularity, Possibility and Critique

Situated learning and CoP are suggested to have developed over three phases, moving from an early focus on learning as an individual trajectory in a practice community (Lave and Wenger, 1991), through attention to communities created by collective learning practices (Wenger 1998; Wenger, McDermott and Synder, 2002), to, most recently, learning as embodied in knowledgeability located across landscapes of multiple communities (Wenger-Traynor *et al.*, 2015).

The initial grounded phase (Lave and Wenger, 1991) offered 'a new approach to understanding learning' (Cox, 2005, p.528) and focused on learning in socially situated informal communities, via changes in identity to meet practice expectations. Concurrently, Brown and Duguid's (1991) work on knowledge management, informal organisational problem solving groups, and intercommunity relationships, was seen as a 'valuable expansion of the concept' (Cox, 2005, p.530). However, these texts problematically assumed communities were coherent and conflict free, an approach dismissed as a crude surface reading by Cox (2005). Additionally, authors questioned the emphasis on conservatism rather than change within CoP (Hager, 2005; Eljaber, 2008) and argued that the early texts failed to 'explicate how things work around the margins of a CoP; in particular, how the discourse, genres and practices of what are termed newcomers are integrated into those of the established community' (Lea, 2006 p.188).

Fuller (2007, p19) suggests this early model offered an image of 'learning as a collective, relational and... social process'. The focus on interrelated heuristics of 'CoP' and 'legitimate peripheral participation' differentiated it from models interested in transmission of information in formalised contexts, by offering an exploration of informalised learning in social settings. However, criticisms

over the lack of an explicit recognition of power within CoP remain (e.g. Hughes, Jewson and Unwin, 2007, p. 173), but Fuller (2007) suggests these issues, while present, have been generally subsumed in discussion by other authors. Indeed, such discussions are apparent throughout the development of the CoP model. Wenger (2010, p.8) states that power issues are 'inherent' in learning within social contexts, given an 'unstable equilibrium' of communities and differing claims to competence, arguing that 'conflict can be a central part of practice'. Equilibrium is more complex across communities, he claimed, as 'there is no guarantee that a successful claim to competence inside a community will translate into a claim to "knowledge" beyond the communities' power' (2010, p.8). More recently, Wenger rejected the notion that power is not discussed (Omidvar and Kislov, 2014), and Wenger-Traynor and Wenger-Traynor (2015, p.7) suggest that assumptions about communities as 'harmonious' places come from misinterpretations of the early texts on CoP, and that in reality, while communities can be harmonious, it may be that 'voices are being silenced'.

The second phase of the development of the model begins with Wenger (1998) focussing on the trajectories taken into a CoP, boundaries between them, and identity. This was followed by Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) which focussed on informal learning in large organisations, and the development of ideas through managerial interventions to grow CoP. However, another criticism emerged at this point, for whilst providing the first definition of a community, it ran so contrary to the wider social science discussion of the time that Cox (2005, p.532) said 'it is difficult to see why Wenger used the term at all', viewing this text as a 'popularization and simplification, but also a commodification' of the concept.

Between these two phases the view moves from one of learning as moving into a community, to one of communities occurring when people learn together through 'interactions *between* groups colocated on complex overlapping landscapes and constellations of interconnected practices' (Omidvar and Kislov, 2014, p.267, emphasis original). Wenger suggests this phase offers a more managerial view of CoP (Omidvar and Kislov, 2014), which Cox (2005) argues presents a shifting

location for identity. Tusting (2005) charts a move from a critical social perspective (Lave and Wenger, 1991), through Wenger's (1998) concern with learning for its own sake, to workplace applications of CoP (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002). These early phases of CoP have been influential and popular in education and management, something that Hughes, Jewson and Unwin (2007) attribute in part to the perceived looseness of the original concept, and its adaptability to multiple settings and applications.

The third, recent, phase of the model, exemplified by Wenger-Traynor *et al.*, (2015) is the first to locate higher education (HE) alongside practice, focussing on identity across communities, relationships across landscapes of practice, and knowledgability as the 'state of the person with respect to a landscape, not with respect to a specific practice' (Omidvar and Kislov, 2014, pp.270-2). Omidvar and Kislov (2014, p.272) suggest that while all three phases 'view learning as a process unfolding at the interface between individuals and social structures, the latest phase of theory development puts a stronger emphasis on individual actors and their trajectories and experiences in complex landscapes of practice'. This research is located firmly in the third phase of the CoP model, looking at experiences of learning located across practice and academic communities, but draws on literature from both the initial phases of CoP, as well as literature which explores and shines light on issues of identity and discourse within communities. Less emphasis is given to the second phase, given its organisational and managerial focus.

2.4.1 Conceptualising Communities of Practice

CoP were originally defined as having three dimensions, those being the mutual engagement of members in a joint enterprise through a shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998, p.73). Engagement requires 'not only our competence, but also the competence of others' (p.76). However, this does not imply agreement, as COP are 'not havens of peace', but contain conflict (p.101). Through engagement a CoP becomes a location of 'situated learning', through 'participation' (Wenger, 1998, p.126). More recently, the third phase has defined CoP as consisting of a domain which defines

group identity, with 'a shared competence that distinguishes members of the group', and a shared repertoire of practice (Wenger-Traynor and Wenger-Traynor, 2015, p.2). Community membership is therefore suggested as threefold, through engagement in practices in the community and exploration of the boundaries between communities, in imagination, as a means of understanding inside one community and of communities across boundaries, and through alignment of the community context in wider society (Wenger-Traynor and Wenger-Traynor, 2015, pp.21-2). Initially known as 'modes of belonging' (Wenger, 1998), these are now known as 'modes of identification' which 'function both inside practices and across boundaries' (Wenger, 2010). The third phase places significant emphasis on 'modes of identification' inside and between communities.

2.4.2 Classifying and Identifying Communities of Practice

Defining CoP is problematic due to an inconsistent use of the typology and its contested stature. Despite Wenger (1998, pp.125-6) offering a definition of CoP, its use is generally absent from the subsequent literature, despite the clarification it offers (Cox, 2005). Indeed, definitions differ between the 'narrow' definition of the first phases and the 'broader' second phase definition of wider social relations through which 'learning is understood' (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2004, p.5), an ambiguity which Fuller (2007, p.20) suggests has 'given others the latitude to use the concept flexibly'.

Indeed, a lack of clarity around definitions and boundaries is a feature of CoP. Membership is 'characterised by varying degrees of consensus, diversity or conflict among those who identify themselves, or are identified by others, as belonging to those communities (James, 2007, p.132, citing Contu and Willmott, 2003). Further, Lave and Wenger (1991, p.98) emphasise the socio-spatial relational networks formed within and beyond each community of practice, which may not 'imply necessarily co-presence, a well-defined identifiable group, or socially visible boundaries'. This lack of boundaries and definition leads the researcher into either drawing their own, or being led by CoP (Fuller, 2007, p.21).

However, Wenger's (1998, pp.125-6) typology suggests that CoP can be identified by a range of signifiers, such as;

'sustained mutual relationships – harmonious or conflictual; substantial overlap in participants' descriptions of who belongs; knowing what others know, what they can do, and how they can contribute to an enterprise; mutually defining identities; specific tools, representations, and other artifacts; certain styles recognized as displaying membership; and a shared discourse reflecting a certain perspective on the world'.

Using this typology, Scott *et al.* (2014, p.55) suggest that the lack of common enterprise between practitioner-students would exclude them as a CoP, despite the presence of mutual engagement and negotiation of practice. However, while such groups may not be collaboratively productive in the strictest sense, it could be argued that the aim of graduation and certification is itself a mutual task.

2.4.3 Trajectories and Participation

The fundamental principle of learning within a CoP is a trajectory from a novice member to an expert through the process of legitimate peripheral participation (LPP), a process reliant upon access to a community (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The emphasis placed on novice to expert trajectories is criticised as failing to acknowledge the participation and learning of experienced members (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2004) producing a 'limited and limiting' view of education (Engeström, 2007, p.42). Broader trajectories have been identified, and the third phase of the CoP model articulates ones which reflect learning that occurs in both practice and HE concurrently. This is highly relevant to this study.

LPP, described as 'pivotal' in understanding CoP (Campbell, Verenikina and Herrington, 2009, p.648) relies upon relationships between experts, as full participant members, whose identity and meaning-

making are acceptable within the community, and therefore hold central locations. Novices are placed at the edge of the community, but are accepted through their engagement in LPP (Wenger, 1998). This conception is noted as a traditional view of education (Lea, 2005) but requires more experienced students to 'skilfully combine some characteristics of being an established member [of the academic community] with those of being an apprentice' (Ivanič, 1998, p.296). Such complex combinations of expert and novice engagement are difficult to achieve and the path taken from peripheral locations to positions of expertise is uncertain. These differing approaches taken to peripheral participation can be seen as ways in which students 'retain power, and maintain their own sense of identity, in the learning process' (Lea, 2005, p.190).

Routes are modelled by the 'paradigmatic' field of possible trajectories, and in the second phase of CoP Wenger (1998, p.154) outlined five possible routes; peripheral, where full participation may not be achieved or desired, but there is sufficient community access to 'contribute to one's identity', inbound, working towards 'the prospect of full participa[tion]', insider, through an ongoing 'evolution of practice' inside a community, boundary, created through spanning communities and finally, outbound, where learning leads a participant out of a community. Such trajectories are significant as 'learning communities will become places of identity to the extent they make trajectories possible – that is, to the extent they offer a past and a future that can be experienced as a personal trajectory' (Wenger, 1998, p.215).

However, the novice to expert trajectory is problematic for postgraduate and mature students. Crossan *et al.* (2003, p.57) observe that 'adults see themselves as increasingly distant from the formalised status of learner; they do not easily perceive themselves as 'student' 'pupil', 'apprentice' or 'trainee', making the conceptual location of adults as novices problematic. This may fail to recognise that part-time mature students may be already participants in that disciplinary community, and they assume students aim at full membership of the academic community. Such a view assumes a homogenous PG experience, which Scott *et al.* (2014) decry.

Postgraduate study is recognised as consisting of complex transitions and interrelationships between students, academic staff, university structures, and importantly the wider social contexts such as family and employment (Tobbell, O'Donnell & Zammit, 2010). This results in a conceptualisation of the postgraduate student as having expertise in the academic community, which may fail to recognise the necessity for appropriate support structures. CoP are seen as helpful in understanding this, offering a heuristic for understanding learning processes in differing contexts (Lea, 2006), which Barton and Tusting (2005, p.3) suggest are particularly effective in adult environments outside of classroom settings, such as the workplace, thereby helping to 'identify commonalities' across settings, and the significance of such learning across communities.

2.4.4 Multiple Communities

Multiple community memberships are likely to be common where individuals interact in several settings, and particularly where individuals are experts in some communities. However, James (2007, pp.139-41) notes that such intersecting memberships may not necessarily be positive, with such individuals occupying 'segregated, even fractured, positions of authority and prestige'. Additionally, 'far from achieving a fixed, stable and secure position, old-timers may experience on-going processes of change in their learning trajectories' (p.141).

In conceptualising multiple communities, two descriptions are used, sometimes confusingly. These are constellation and landscape. Constellations are a 'social configuration ... too far removed from the scope of engagement of participants, too broad, too diverse, or too diffuse to be usefully treated as single CoP' (Wenger, 1998, p.127), and can be identified through their 'related enterprises', often 'serving a cause of belonging to an institution', 'having members in common', and having overlapping styles and discourses'. They are commonly found within professional disciplines (Wenger, 1998; Cox, 2005) and provide support for professional membership and identity. Individual CoPs may be part of multiple constellations, and may be problematic to identify as they 'need not be reified in the discourse of any of the practices involved, [and] may or may not be

recognized by the participants' (Wenger, 1998, p.128). They may be incidental or organised and the connections between communities may be intentional or emergent. Such amorphous categorisation leads Engeström (2007, pp.42-3) to suggest that this definition of a constellation is so broad that 'it may be practically anything'. Continuity across the boundaries of CoP in constellations occurs through the individual trajectories across the constellation and the identities developed in doing so, the practices and objects which define CoP boundaries, and the discourses which define and transcend these boundaries (Wenger, 1998, p.129). The complex interlocking of differing communities leads Handley *et al.* (2006, p.650, emphasis original) to suggest that identity construction occurs not only '*within* a community but in the spaces *between* multiple communities'.

More recently these intersecting communities, particularly within a profession, have been described as 'landscapes of practice' (Wenger-Traynor and Wenger-Traynor, 2015, p.13), a term previously used by Wenger (1998, p.118) to describe the 'textures of continuities and discontinuities' between communities, rather than the intersections of communities. Wenger (2010, p.4) suggests that landscapes of practice are where 'our ability to know is shaped', suggesting that 'the body of knowledge is not merely a curriculum. It is a whole landscape of practices – involved not only in practicing the profession, but also in research, teaching, management, regulation, professional associations and many other contexts'. Consequently, the 'landscape is dynamic as communities emerge, merge, split, compete, complement each other, and disappear. And the boundaries between the practices involved are not necessarily peaceful or collaborative'. This emphasis on constellations and landscapes as significant in learning, and especially in learning for those whose engagement requires the negotiation of several, is clearly significant for practitioner-students.

However, there are gaps in understanding how learning occurs in constellations (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2002; Mørk *et al.*, 2008; Chen and Chuang, 2010; Kislov, 2014), which led Hughes, Jewson and Unwin (2007, p.172) to call for studies of constellations of practice. One issue is a lack of understanding of the locations of different CoP within constellations and landscapes, perhaps as

individual CoP and their practices can be seen a peripheral to a wider constellation or landscape (Wenger, 1998, p.168). Indeed, Wenger (1998, pp.246-7) argues that given the distinctiveness of practices, such 'global view' cannot be achieved. This perhaps explains the very limited examples of mapping of constellations, with Nishino's (2012) modelling of communities within English as Foreign Language tutors in Japan, being the only obvious instance.

Furthermore, recognition of expertise across boundaries is complex. Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002, pp.150-2) suggest that as 'knowledge sticks to practice' its ability to be transmitted across boundaries is affected, and those recognised as experts in one setting may not be elsewhere. However, transmission is possible, as Hughes, Jewson and Unwin (2007, pp.172-4) argue, constellations 'may facilitate multiple learning experiences and trajectories' in which the 'straightforward trajectory from novice to old-timer' creates trajectories in which members would 'repeatedly appear as novices and old-timers, albeit with increasing levels of knowledge'.

Clearly, learning in constellations is complex. Mørk *et al.* (2008, p.21) observed that where constellations 'involve bringing together partially incompatible CoPs... learning occurs in a context of potential tensions and conflict', creating problematic transmission between communities. More recently, Wenger (2010, pp.6-7) questioned expertise as related to accountability in each community, asking 'should a nurse be accountable to research, to management, to a curriculum, to regulation? To all of them?' and asserting that 'to conceptualise knowledgeability in landscapes of practice is to think of knowing as the modulation of identification among multiple sources of accountability', involving a 'constant interplay between practices and identities'.

One early model of how interplay effects learning comes from Kasworm's (2003) study of adult undergraduate students. This drew on CoP models and the impacts of engagement with multiple learning communities, identifying a number of alignments. These alignments were successful when students attempted to align academic and real-world knowledge, particularly where relationships across communities were significant in embedding knowledge, but less successful in students who

preferred real-world knowledge. This was perhaps related to their motivation for study as a means to promotion, led them to dismiss academic staff as incompetent and unknowing, with such students particularly troubled by situations which placed their professional competence at odds with academic assessment judgements. Despite its undergraduate focus, Kasworm offers insights into the experiences of mature returners to study, and into how alignments between practice and study in constellations can affect student experiences.

The different alignments across constellations and landscapes are the focus of the third stage of CoP, with Fenton-O'Creevy *et al.*'s (2015b) study of PT practitioner students in healthcare and business. This contributed significantly to the model of multiple memberships and learning trajectories. They describe these 'learning travellers ... find[ing] their way into and around specific practices, build[ing] an image of where these practices are located in the landscape, engage[ing] in multiple places in the landscape at once, cross boundaries, and develop[ing] an identity that is resilient and productive' (Fenton-O'Creevy *et al.*, 2015b, p.151). Additionally, Fenton-O'Creevy *et al.* (2015b, pp.155) assert that the 'incommensurate ways of ... experiencing incompetence in the transition to a new setting are glossed over or treated as peripheral to the learning experience', so the students' expertise in the practice setting is felt irrelevant in the academic environment. This has led to a call for universities to do more to make 'explicit' the boundaries between practice and academic communities (Fenton-O'Creevy *et al.*, 2015b, pp.153).

Fenton-O'Creevy *et al.* (2015b, p.152) suggest that for these students, alignment to the academic community is 'provisional and temporary', because of trajectories which are not full participation, but brief visits. Fenton-O'Creevy *et al.* (2015a) describe journeys *through* but not *into* an academic community as one of a 'tourist' or 'sojourner', differentiated by the levels of engagement. Tourist students' temporary engagement recalls Wenger's (1998) marginal participation position, while the sojourner has an experience more aligned to the apprentice, but, again, only for a short period. Further, Fenton-O'Creevy *et al.* (2015a) suggest that very few students will make a full journey

towards an academic career. It is worth noting that the use of ‘sojourner’ as a term to describe a temporary alignment to a community of practice is well-established in teacher education (for example, Luxon and Peelo, 2009; Gleeson and Tait, 2012; Correa, Martinez-Arbelais and Aberasturi-Apraiz, 2015) but seemingly has not been used widely elsewhere.

Fenton-O’Creedy *et al.* (2015a) illustrate these trajectories in nursing students, and this diagram is reproduced here, without the nursing labels, as the authors acknowledge that it applies more widely. Line A describes the route taken directly from the one work-role to another. Line B shows the suggested tourist route and line C that of the sojourner.

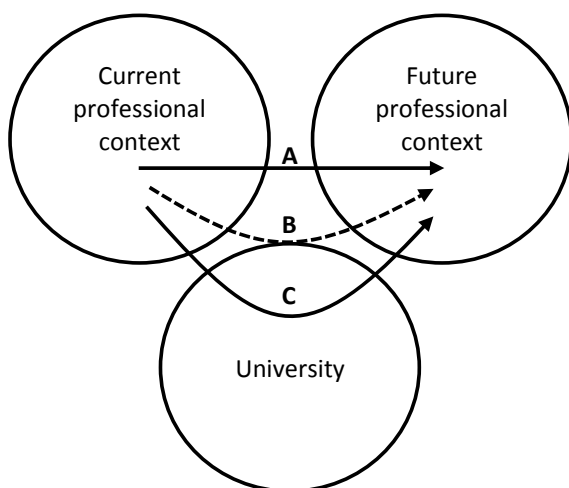


Figure 2.3: Fenton-O’Creedy *et al.* (2015a)

These trajectories appear to be significant for learning. Fenton-O’Creedy *et al.* (2015a) suggest ‘tourists’ have little allegiance to an academic identity, and superficial engagement with academic practices, while ‘sojourners’ engage more deeply with academic practice and the identity work this requires. They assert that trajectories have an impact on academic literacy, given the differences between workplace and university, although this may relate to overall literacy skills. However, this issue remains unexplored in relation to management students. For sojourners, the experience potentially offers a ‘profound opportunity for learning’ (Fenton-O’Creedy *et al.*, 2015a, p.45) due to modifications of practice leading to successful engagement. This creates an alignment between low and high levels of participation which has close parallels to student approaches to learning, as the

participation required by deep approaches to learning, and the consequent work to accommodate this within identity, reflects the temporary sojourner route.

2.5 Student Approaches to Learning and CoP

This impact of the social context on student engagement is well known, both through the 'dichotomy' (Entwistle, 2009, p.33) of surface and deep approaches to learning, and the contextual models of learning and teaching which are felt to influence this. Marton and Säljö (1976) originally distinguished between the surface and deep approaches, but Entwistle (2015, p.10) notes that this distinction is 'improbably simple' despite its psychological and neurological foundations. This model was developed, most notably by Entwistle and Ramsden (1983) who proposed an additional strategic (aka achieving) approach. Entwistle (2003) summarises the surface approach as having a focus on facts and routines enabling a minimal engagement with learning, often drawn from a fear of failure. Strategic approaches are focussed on the recognition of success marked by grades, achieved through attention to self-management of study, whilst the intrinsic motivation of deep approaches lead to a comprehensive understanding of a subject.

These approaches are located in a contextual setting by Biggs' (1989) '3P' model which divides learning and teaching into presage, process and product. For students these are personal characteristics and teaching context, approaches to tasks, and a resultant approach to learning (Figure 2.4: Biggs (1989)). For teachers, presage includes teacher characteristics and institutional context, process the approach taken, resulting in the students' approach, and outcomes of learning.

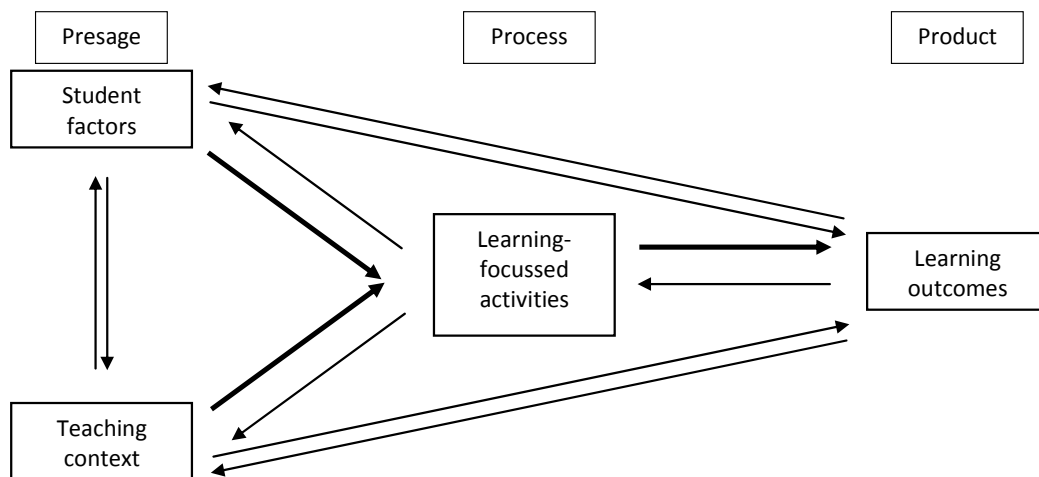


Figure 2.4: Biggs (1989)

Biggs (1989, p.13) identifies the surface approach as strongly linked to extrinsic motivation, deep to a strong interest in subject matter, and strategic as aligned to visible achievement. However, the model's development in schools may mean it inadequately addresses adults learning (Tynjälä, 2013). Further, Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2003, p.5) suggest that 'a learner's current disposition to learning (or work) can be understood only through their past lives, including their position in relation to various fields that they occupied, together with their experiences and interactions with others, in the past and the present'. This lack of contextual framework has led others to create ones in relation to workplace learning.

Three are significant. Price (2011, 2014) develops the model to reflect the perceptions of student and teacher, and highlights that the social, institutional and professional context and the focus on the professional context of teachers, ignoring a one for students, fails to reflect the social setting for mid-career learners.

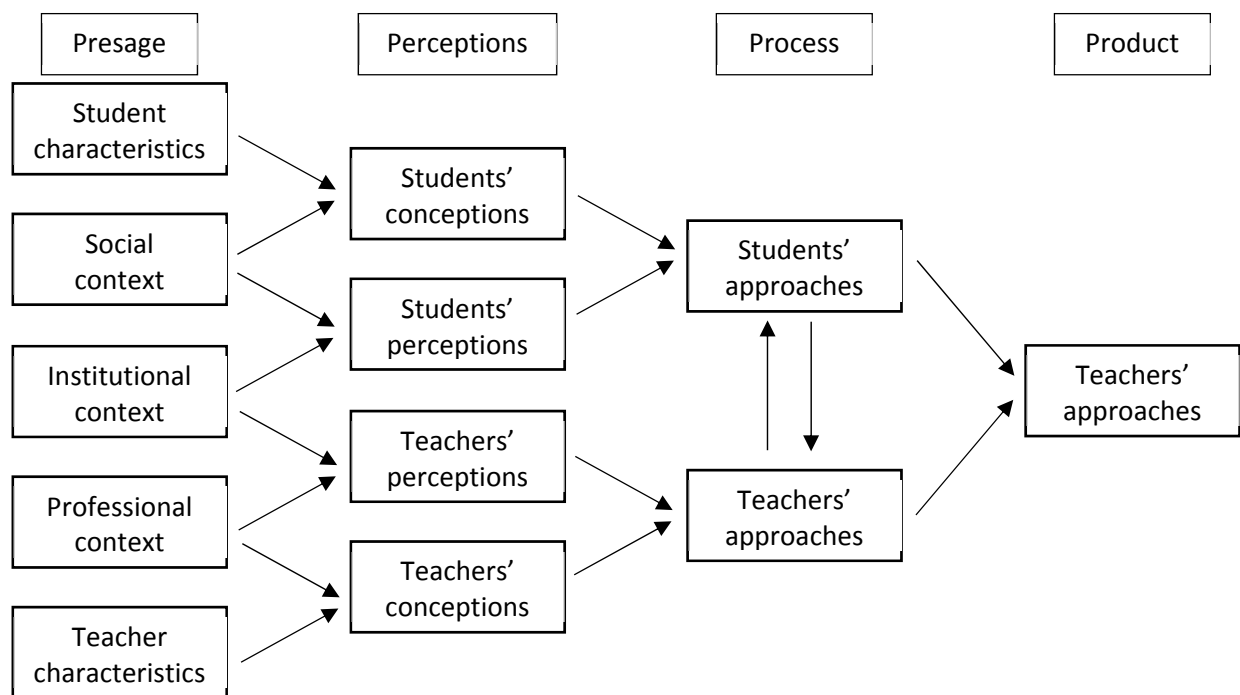


Figure 2.5: Price (2011, 2014)

This is more clearly articulated in Marsick, Watkins and O'Connor's (2011) model of workplace learning, which draws on Biggs' concept (Tynjälä, 2013), and emphasises a frame of socio-cultural context.

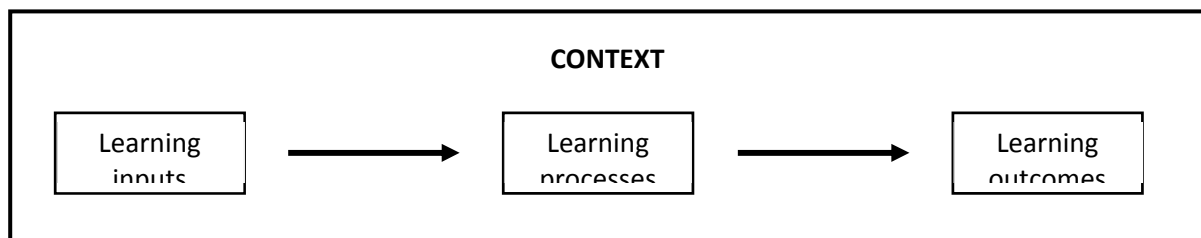


Figure 2.6: Marsick, Watkins and O'Connor (2011)

Tynjälä's (2013) model synthesises this with Biggs' model, locating '3P' stages within the wider sociocultural context and foregrounding learners' interpretation of 'how they see themselves as workers and learners' (Tynjälä, 2013, p.15). The final change is of labelling to reflect a non-formal educational context for workplace learning, and the altering of factors to develop this.

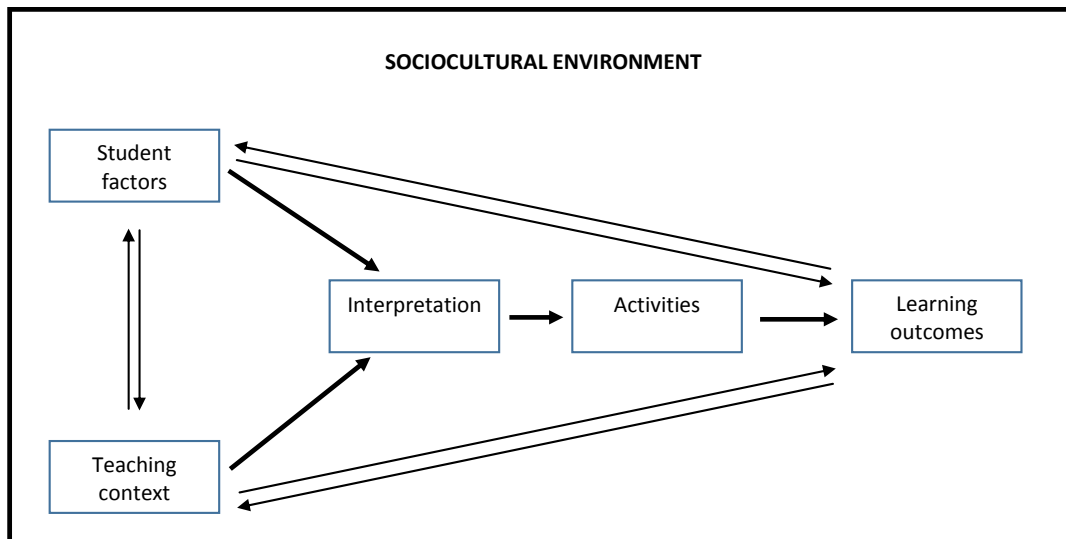


Figure 2.7: Tynjälä (2013)

As well as an explicit re-labelling to reflect workplace contexts, this model recognises the significance of identity to learning, and makes strong links to CoP, which Tynjälä (2013, p.31) argues provides ‘important insights into the wider socio-cultural features of the phenomenon’ of learning. It is to these wider socio-cultural features that this chapter now turns.

2.6 Boundaries and Multi-membership

The significance of boundaries within multi-membership of communities is clearly emphasised by Wenger (1998, p.129) in his classification of the practice interactions between communities. This conceptual location of boundaries and borders is common in exploring transitions in HE, with Mann (2001, p.11) describing entry to HE as akin to a migrant ‘crossing the borders of a new country’, where ‘the student who stands on the edge of a discipline is an outsider faced with the decision of whether to join or not and at what costs’. Whilst Mann was not writing about CoP, it is clear that the metaphor of the boundary is resonant.

Wenger (1998) suggests boundaries are inherent, given the differing histories, identities and competencies represented in communities. These aspects complicate and may well contribute to their being recognised as locations of misunderstanding and conflict (Kubiak *et al.* 2015a, 2015b), arising from differing perspectives and uncertainty around competence (Wenger, 2010). In the third

phase of CoP this is reinforced by Wenger's emphasis (in Omdivar and Kislov, 2014, p.269) on the 'embodiment of th[e] view of learning as happening at the boundary between the personal and social structure – not just in the social structure or not just in the individual, but in the relationship between the two'.

Boundary locations are widely recognised as troubling within CoP. Wenger (1998, p.187) notes that learners must negotiate non-convergent practices across them, something requiring 'specific forms of participation and reification ... in the form of boundary practices and of people with multi-membership who can straddle boundaries and do the work of translation'. To some extent this assumes multi-membership as congruent, making straddling possible. However, this may not occur, as while training courses, and education more generally, can provide interactions between CoP and the rest of the world (Wenger 1998, p.115) staff on such courses, 'isolated from other practitioners and immersed in classroom issues, cease to be representative of anything else; and artefacts gain local meanings that do not point anywhere' (Wenger, 1998, p.115). So, while HE might be an example of a boundary encounter between the practice and academic worlds, it may not function in this way, and it is not until more recent iterations of CoP that exploration of these interactions reaches any depth. Early CoP theory tended to look at individual communities and so is criticised as not reflecting multi-memberships across constellations and boundaries. This focus on singular communities took place despite the social world being 'characterised by multiple membership; it has unresolved boundaries, with many different fluid CoP which exist in a variety of relationships to one another, both supporting and competing' Barton and Hamilton (2005, p.25). This is rectified in the third phase of COP, with its emphasis on landscapes of practice and therefore on boundaries.

In exploring this Wenger-Traynor and Wenger-Traynor (2015, p.23) return to the significance of knowledge in single communities, defined as competence, and across multiple communities, defined as knowledgability. They suggest that the complexity found in landscapes comes from differing regimes of competence across boundaries, and in translating competence in one community to

knowledgability across communities. This requires a negotiation which 'always involves the question of how the perspective of one practice is relevant to that of another' (Wenger-Traynor and Wenger-Traynor, 2015, p.18) implying that practitioners may find the concept of a taught body of knowledge as 'unproblematically applicable to practice' difficult. For practitioner students, taught knowledge may enable the 'use [of] theory as a critical stance towards practice' (p.19), but the application of practice to theory may not occur, as claims to knowledgability may be superseded by academic claims to competence. Here, student 'voices ... are silenced by the claims to knowledge of others' (p.16), leading to a marginalisation of identity for students with substantial practice experience, as they experience conflicting claims to competence in both settings (p.25). As such boundary trajectories, whilst 'necessary for the integration of a landscape of practice' (Wenger-Traynor and Wenger-Traynor, 2015, p.18) may not occur in the necessarily aligned practice and academic communities.

The role of boundaries in education is well recognised, but the growing attention to transmission across work/education boundaries often fails to explain the learning which occurs at these locations, particularly around the markers which delineate them (Akkerman and Bakker, 2011). This is attributed to the ambiguous nature of boundaries, which act as a location of 'socio-cultural difference leading to a discontinuity in action or interaction ... suggest[ing] a sameness and continuity in the sense that within discontinuity two or more sites are relevant to one another in a particular way' (Akkerman and Bakker, 2011, p.133). Boundaries can be seen, therefore, as places of reflection and perspective, allowing a view of practice from another location (Akkerman and Bakker, 2011), and as locations of learning occurring 'through participation in multiple social spaces and in the process of crossing between contexts' (Fuller, 2007, p.26, citing Osterlund, 1996).

Multiple CoP membership creates 'conflicting demands which pull quite profoundly on different aspects of our identity' (Kubiak *et al.*, 2015a, p.64) requiring a modulation of identification through forms of congruence or incongruence. Incongruence arises where 'practices cultivated in one

community of practice may be unacceptable, or even offensive in another' (p.65), and while this can lead to learning, it has personal costs as unaligned engagement creates 'an uncomfortable place to be, evoking anger, confusion, dismissal, stereotyping and demoralisation' (p.69). Kubiak *et al.* (2015a) suggest that groups can work toward alignment through processes supportive of diversity, but this presupposes community acceptance of the legitimacy of members and their practices. This does not explain what occurs in settings where convergence is not encouraged and practices are not viewed as appropriate. For example, in academic environments, practitioners may bring practices such as discourse norms, which are not seen to align with academic expectations and so are unlikely to be accommodated.

2.6.1 Transitions Across Boundaries

Boundary negotiation is achieved through boundary crossing by individuals, and through boundary objects, which offer a 'bridging function' (Akkerman and Bakker, 2011, p.133, citing Suchman, 1994 and Star, 1989), a function recognised within CoP (Wenger, 1998). As boundary crossers, individuals are in a difficult position, as they are expected to align to both sets of community standards. Thus they are 'sandwiched' between them and may be viewed as too aligned to one or the other (Akkerman and Bakker, 2011, pp.14-2, citing Grosjean, 2002). Meanwhile, boundary objects can include 'titles, proficiency frameworks, portfolios, purposes and values' and are 'tool[s] to support engagement' (Kubiak *et al.*, 2015b, pp.93-4), acting as bridges to the gaps between CoP. Indeed, this effect is noted in Nishino's (2012) study of constellations. Within education academics invoking practitioner experience demonstrably straddle the academic-practice gap and studying can act as a broker for students, while simultaneously offering reinforcement of practitioner identities (Kubiak *et al.*, 2015b).

Chen and Chuang (2010) observe that the term broker is not new, having its roots in anthropological work in the 1950s, and developing into the distinct concepts of brokers and boundary spanners. They suggest that boundary spanners create joint meaning through interaction, thereby achieving

hierarchical legitimacy in constellations. Brokers, perhaps due to their 'presupposed' high competencies, hold 'exchange' positions, and ambivalent multi-memberships. This can be overcome in online communities, creating locations central to their own CoP, and the constellations in which they reside. However, Kubiak *et al.* (2015b, p.82) note brokers lacking legitimacy may be required to 'remain at the edge of a community of practice, a liminal inside-outsider constantly faced with the challenge of how to make the practice of one community relevant to another'. This can create an uncertainty around such boundary actors, their locations, and legitimacy.

Whilst boundaries can be locations of integration, interaction, and relationship development (Kislov, 2014) they also create gaps between academic and practice communities, particularly around research, echoing the suggested gap which exists between HRM academic and practitioner groups (See chapter 4). Constellations therefore hold 'the potential for both continuity and discontinuity', resulting in non-participation rather than 'open conflict between the practices' (Kislov, 2014, p.320). For students, Fenton-O'Creevy *et al.* (2015a) suggest that the complexity experienced by practitioner-students in crossing between practice and academic settings was related to the level of ease with which academic content and practice application could be seen to be related. If difficult, this led to 'discomfort' which Fenton-O'Creevy *et al.* (2015a, p.60) suggests can be the site for significant professional and personal learning.

2.6.2 Boundaries and Liminality

What is perhaps most significant about boundaries is the two-way transience inherent in them. Mann (2001) views students as standing on a boundary, with transitions across this as fluctuating back and forth. This may be more acute within multiple CoP, as Handley *et al.* (2006, p.648) suggest they are 'more liminal in character – 'betwixt and between' different CoP ... yet actively involved in both'. Here the link between boundaries and liminality becomes explicit. Liminality, from the Latin *limen*, meaning threshold, is 'a suspended state in which understanding approximates to a kind of

mimicry or lack of authenticity' (Meyer and Land, 2006a, p.16), something suggestive of the novice locations which learners may occupy.

Discussions of liminality draw on the works of Van Gennep (1908) on how rites of passage mark transitions between different phases or stages of life, and Turner (1967, 1969, 1974, 1987), particularly the description of these liminal phases as periods of 'ambiguity and paradox, a confusion of all the customary identities' (1987, p.7). Such phases have been aligned to professional transitions (Turner, 1987), and HE, with Field and Morgan-Klein (2010) suggesting it represents 'an institutionalised state that is explicitly betwixt and between two other statuses'. Hence entry to professions such as HRM become liminal processes, and the role of HE in entering the HRM practitioner community forms a significant liminal rite of passage across boundaries.

One of the key applications of liminality in HE has been through the development of threshold concepts, which originated in research into 'strong' teaching and learning environments (Cousin, 2006a). Threshold concepts are those which are central to understanding a subject, identified as having five 'core concepts'. They are transformative, with a concomitant shift in perspective and identity and irreversible, so it is difficult to return to the previous state of understanding. The irreversible nature of a threshold is indicated by the 'difficulty experienced by expert practitioners looking back across thresholds they have personally long since crossed and attempting to understand (from their own transformed perspective) the difficulties faced from (untransformed) student perspectives' (Meyer and Land, 2006 intro, p.7). They are also integrative, combining knowledge in ways which may be definitive of a discipline, or of a community of practice, and are bounded. Finally, though not always, they are in some way troublesome (Meyer and Land, 2006 intro).

Originating in economics (Cousin, 2006, p.4), threshold concepts have seen significant development within this field, and in allied areas of leadership and general management, but the lack of their application within HRM as a discipline is evidenced by its absence from the extensive, and highly

current, list of related publications (Flanagan, 2017). Perhaps some of the difference in publishing arises from the suggestion noted by Meyer and Land (2006a, p.11, citing Davies, 2002) that the levels of conceptual difficulty differences between economics and business studies may be indicative of the level of troublesome-ness within the subjects, and as such the existence of threshold concepts. Indeed both Vidal, Smith and Spetic (2015, p.500) and Wright and Hibbert (2015, p.443) describe them as 'underexplored' and 'under-developed' within management education. However, recent studies within business and management may offer some insight. For example, Bajada *et al.* (2016) suggest that the application of threshold concepts is significant in developing business students' graduate competence by minimising the fractionalisation of the subject content, whilst Bradley, Burch and Burch (2015) suggest that the application of threshold concepts can overturn students' conceptions of management as a discipline of 'common sense'.

Within HRM, experience suggests that the concept of power within the employment relationship could be viewed as a threshold concept, given the significant transformative and possibly irreversible shift to a pluralist and even radical view that is observable. This view of power both underpins and explains much else within HRM, in particular employee relations, satisfying the integrated and bounded conceptual categories. Indeed, Williams (2014) identifies power as a key concept within the understanding of political institutions in undergraduate business education, but not on power as a conceptual focus within business itself. However, the extent to which power is a troublesome concept is unclear and would require deeper investigation. However, such a task may be inappropriate, given the emergent shift from identifying threshold concepts within disciplines to across HE more generally (White, Olsen and Schumann, 2016, p.54, citing Meyer, 2010). In this they caution against assumptions based solely on academics' views of student interactions with subject content, urging an identification which utilises both academic and student viewpoints. Without such detailed studies, and in the absence of clear approaches to establishing these (White, Olsen and Schumann, 2016, p. 55) the existence of threshold concepts within HRM remains unclear.

More widely, Land, Meyer and Smith (2008, p.xi) have linked threshold concepts with CoP, as much of the research on the topic explores how 'students enter disciplinary CoP and acquire the knowledge practices and particular identities, or ways of being, needed to enter them'. Indeed, Cousin (2008, p.265) suggests that 'a significant strength' of the CoP model is the 'insistence that learning always involves a process of becoming; it is never a completed state' but that the real benefit of the combination of both would be in the 'cross-fertilis[ation] of the concept of peripheral participation with that of liminality' (Cousin, 2008, p.266).

Meyer and Land explore this, suggesting that transference is complicated by the troublesome nature of tacit knowledge where 'emergent but unexamined understandings are often shared within a specific community of practice' (2006a, p.12, citing Wenger, 1998) and the inherent alien-ness of knowledge across boundaries (Meyer and Land, 2006a, citing Perkins 1999). Furthermore, the integrative ideas that are characteristic of a CoP, 'serve to demarcate between disciplinary areas, to define academic territories' (Meyer and Land, 2006 intro, p.8). As such, entry to communities is noted by Meyer and Land (2006b, p.22) as akin to rite of passage.

Liminality is also linked to the surface, deep and strategic approaches to learning, as noted by Fenton-O'Creevy *et al.*'s (2015a, pp.60-61) observation of student boundary straddling practices creating temporary, perhaps low, engagement with learning, arising from the 'disjunction' between communities. Liminal positions on the periphery of a CoP may lead to practices which appear to be like those central to a community, but are actually surface or strategic attempts to align through compensatory mimicry. Meyer and Land (2006b, p.24) argue this is created by 'understanding *and* troubled misunderstanding' and 'when the student is aware that what is required is beyond grasp, other than through the pretension of mimicry'. This echoes Cousin's (2006, pp.139-40) observation of mimicry as a pre-liminal stage, acting as a precursor to full transitions. Liminality is also strongly linked to identity issues in education (Field and Morgan-Klein, 2010) and the provisional identities which arise (Rutherford and Pickup, 2015) which Meyer and Land (2006b, p.23) link to the

awakening awareness of disciplinary membership, alongside the acquisition of ‘a new status and identity within the community’.

2.7 Identity, CoP and Education

The centrality of identity to CoP is illustrated by Wenger’s (1998, p.212) assertion that ‘we form communities... because identification is at the very core of the social nature of our identities’, and the prominence of identity remains in the third phases of CoP, as a key feature of interaction between communities. For Wenger (1998, p.146) identity is the ‘mutual constitution’ and ‘interplay’ between the individual and the community, making the emphasis not on the individualised view, but on the collective.

Within education identity and CoP are aligned, making trajectories the ‘proposal of an identity’ (Wenger, 1998, p.156), and so the use of CoP to support identity in education is recommended (Anderson, Huggins and Winfield, 2015, p.48). Indeed, whilst for Lave and Wenger learning is seen ‘in terms of identity formation’ (in Fuller, 2007, p.19) rather than knowledge, the opposite is also true, with Wenger (1998, p.212) suggesting that learning is not only about knowledge acquisition, but also about realising identities. Learning therefore is a process of identity formation and adjustment, ‘of realignment between socially defined competence and personal experience’ (Wenger, 2010, pp.2-3). This alignment has significant implications across constellations, as in these settings identity has certain characteristics, being the trajectory ‘within ... as well as transitions across communities’ a ‘nexus of multi-membership’, both ‘sequential[ly]’, across settings, and ‘simultaneous[ly]’, in multiple settings, and as such it is ‘inherent in the very notion of identity in a landscape’ (Wenger, 2010, p.5).

For experienced practitioners entering academic settings requires a liminal balance between two settings where competence and knowledgability may not be aligned. Fenton-O’Creevy *et al.* (2015a, p.53) suggest that for students on tourist and sojourner trajectories, multi-membership is a process of ‘juggling’ multiple identities and of ‘crossing and re-crossing identity boundaries’. For MBA

students, boundary complexities included the 'surrendering' of workplace identities (Fenton-O'Creevy *et al.*, 2015a, p.57), troublesome transitions potentially disconfirming for identity, which can lead to disengagement from a community (Fenton-O'Creevy, Dimitriadis and Scobie, 2015). This is recognised with regard to mature students, with Kasworm (2008, p.29) suggesting that study requires a continual 'a re-negotiation or adaption of themselves and their lives'.

Academic identity involves complex locations, especially for part-time, mature and postgraduate students. Tobbell and O'Donnell (2013, p.136) found that postgraduate students 'do not necessarily possess effective academic identities', while Taylor and House (2010) found academic competence significant in identity issues for mature students. Even identifying as a student may be problematic, and Butcher (2015) found significant conflict, suggested by students describing themselves as 'in the middle of a Masters, rather than I'm a student', and stating that 'in the student world I'm a professional, and in the professional world I'm a student' (Butcher, 2015, p.32) indicating that part-time identities are particularly contingent and complex.

These issues stretch beyond the university campus, into the home. Studying places stress on social relationships. Family and friends may feel, for instance, that the student has a sense of superiority (Baxter and Britton, 2001). Conflict between study and home may also lead to a 'dual identity', and the subsuming of student status in social settings (Mercer and Saunders, 2004, p.287). However, the junction between studying and employment is where the complexity of identity across communities is most acute. Pluralised identities are inherent in modern employment (Caza and Creary, 2016), but it is this which may be the issue. Warhurst (2011) found studying an MBA while working created a dichotomy between reinforced professional credibility, while necessitating a breaking away from such an identity. This echoes Askham's (2008) suggestion that work-based mature students hold identities constructed on profession, but find this in conflict with their student identity. Such shifts are well known in mature students (Taylor and House, 2010), part-time students (Anderson, Huggins and Winfield, 2015) and postgraduates (Tobbell and O'Donnell, 2015), and the link between these

identity issues and CoP is explicit, with Tobbell and O'Donnell (2015) suggesting they arise from a lack of clear community location. This implies that appropriate relationships with others can support the navigation of identities, while Anderson, Huggins and Winfield's (2015) call for part-time postgraduate students to be made more aware of potential identity shifts, suggesting CoP may be helpful.

However, models of identity congruence in multi-memberships also exist. Kubiak *et al.* (2015a, p.73) notes that while this can have 'potential for dissonance and identificatory ambivalence' locations of 'personal coherence and comfort' are possible, and are made more likely when explicit recognition exists that not all aspects of an individual need to be brought into membership of all communities. Additionally, Kubiak *et al.*, (2015a, p.79) state that 'settings may vary in the kinds of identifications they allow [but] practitioners do not passively acquiesce. They 'talk back' (Lomax, 2013) trying to change their circumstances, modulating their identities by identifying in one mode and not others', and may 'reflexively find ways to maintain some form of identification that allows congruence with their multi-membership'. This suggests that despite the complexity of multi-membership, people can turn on and off their identification to accommodate their location, so an HR practitioner located in an academic setting may be able to 'turn off' practitioner aspects of identity, although it is unclear is what impact this may have.

2.7.1 Social Identity Approach

There are several approaches which can be taken in attempting to understand identity. This study utilises social identity approach, given its implicit recognition within situated learning theory, in particular the interplay of individual and collective community, the relevance to mature students, and the applicability to concepts of liminality and student approaches to learning, making it cogent with the conceptual framework. Social identity approach combines the works of Tajfel (1978, 1982) with Turner (Tajfel and Turner, 2001; Turner 1975, 1982, 1984) in response to individualistic social

psychology (Jenkins, 2008) which foregrounds understanding of individual identity through group membership, and inter-group relations.

Despite being located in social psychology, its main impact has been in management and business (Reicher, Spears and Haslam, 2010, p.61) making it more influential outside of psychology than within. Social identity approach and CoP have been particularly allied in settings of professional education (StAmour, 2006; Burford, 2012; Dorrington, 2012; Warhurst, 2012; Oliver, 2013) and is particularly relevant to the study of mature students, given their locations within and without HE. Within situated learning Handley *et al.* (2006, p.644) suggest that despite 'little explicit reference', the concept is founded on 'a critical reading of social identity theory'. It offers a complement to existing learning approach literatures (Smyth *et al.*, 2015), and links to liminality through the concept of otherness (Cousin, 2006a).

The approach links two concepts. Firstly, the narrow concept of social identity as a self-concept regarding memberships of groups, where identity 'derives from knowledge of [an individual's] membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership' (Tajfel, 1987, p.63). Secondly, the broader spectrum of self-categorisation theory, where group memberships are perceived through processes of comparative and normative fit. The two theories are 'linked by their concern with the processes that surround the way in which people define themselves as members of a social group (Reicher, Spears and Haslam, 2010, p.45), creating a social identity which is 'relational', based on the perceptions of similarity and difference to others, shared with others, and produced by 'our collective history and present' (Reicher, Spears and Haslam, 2010, p.45). Key to the approach is an understanding of conceptions of ingroup and outgroup categorisation, with the prioritisation of the ingroup. This is based upon the perception of different ingroup statuses and their legitimacy and the ability to move between these groups, emphasising perceived negative traits in the outgroup (Spears, 2011). These groupings are achieved through categorisation, assigning individuals to groups, identification, aligning the self or

others with groups, and comparison, by which the value of the ingroup is measured. Outgroups are therefore 'devalued and derogated' by ingroup members, as a means of developing and maintaining 'meaning and value' for the ingroup (Spears, 2011, p.202), and as such have 'a sense of positive group distinctiveness from the other group(s) to which we do not belong, and against which we compare our own group' (Spears, 2011, p.203), in doing so giving themselves value, and a sense of self.

This comparison of in and outgroupings is significant in constellations and landscapes, enabling an understanding of trajectories and boundaries between groups. For example, while self-esteem hypothesis suggests individuals move groups to attain higher esteem, they may also manipulate perceptions of outgroups as lower status to the benefit of their ingroup, by redefining memberships, or valued characteristics (Reicher, Spears and Haslam, 2010, p.50). Across group boundaries, these strong ingroup identifications lead to a cognitive distancing from outgroups (Korschun, 2015) creating issues for boundary spanning. An example of this can be seen in Fenton-O'Creevy, Dimitriadis and Scobie's (2015, p.38) observation of locating practices across landscapes, 'imagining ... the scorn with which ...colleagues [in other communities] would treat practices in the new setting we have joined'.

2.7.2 Social Identity Theory and Learning

In education social identity appears to link strongly to student approaches to learning, with Bluic *et al.* (2011) and Platow *et al.* (2013) finding strong social identification with the student community aligning to deep approaches to learning, although Smyth *et al.* (2015) found this link was dependant on deep approaches being the accepted group norm. In online student communities, such group norms have been found to ally to social characteristics, where 'social identity in/congruence was negotiated through either establishing commonality of identity or dissociating with difference' (Hughes, 2010, p.53). Congruence came from practices and knowledge which could be successfully relocated from other groups in which students engaged, but incongruence arose because of

‘tensions over academic and local practitioner knowledge’ and the clash between the ‘formal language of academic writing and the informal speech’ (Hughes, 2010, p.56).

Perhaps the most relevant study is Hallier and Summers (2011), who used social identity approach to explore undergraduate HRM students’ perceptions of academic and practitioner groupings following short term placements. This limited exposure was felt to offer only a crude impression of HRM practice, but as many were mature students, they probably had experience of employment. Following the placement, four approaches to alignment between academic and practitioner groups were found;

- A *defence* identity, focussing on practitioner approaches, and rejecting academic discourse despite academic ability
- A *dissonance* identity, again favouring practitioners, and identifying academics as an outgroup of the HRM profession
- A resonance identity, in which a reconciliation was achieved between academic views of HRM with professional identity development’
- Finally, a *rejection* identity, preferring academic approaches to HRM over practitioner (Hallier and Summers, 2011, pp.210-216)

Within the *defence identity*, the outgrouping of academic discussion as biased and the strong identification with practitioners enabled a view of the ‘academic group and its values [as] now unnecessary’ (p.211). The *dissonance identity* was less absolute, and while favouring practitioner viewpoints, engaged with critical and conflicting academic debate, recognising that academic staff are not necessarily HRM profession members, and that multiple academic viewpoints exist. In this group the mature students overcame this dissonance through processes of ‘accommodation’, including seeking ‘reassurance from HR practitioners’. For both identities there was a ‘stereotyping [of] academics and academic evidence as biased and unrealistic’ (p.212).

Resonance identity students coped better with the development of a critical voice and achieved a more sophisticated understanding of pluralist HRM. Whilst less affected by the conflict between practice and academic voices, they privileged the practitioner identity and voice, linking study to practitioner expectations. These students perceived the outgroup rejection of academic HRM in the *defence identity* students as coming from a personalisation of the discourse, and of the identity of the students; 'they can't criticise it because it's like criticising them' (p.214). *Rejection identity* students 'valu[ed] the academic examination of HRM above that of its practice and professional membership' (p.215), rejecting HRM practice. This placed them in complex social positions in respect to the strong practice alignment of other students and led to the consideration of career paths in which a critical voice might be better accommodated, such as the 'third' sector, politics, trade unionism and teaching.

Hallier and Summers (2011, p.216) suggest this study 'highlights the importance of those situations where a poor fit between [a] person's expectations and experiences does not easily lead to a repudiation of an important social identity', as these 'disconfirming learning experiences' mean students struggle to accommodate both identities. Given these students had only limited experience of, and therefore allegiance to, practitioner communities, how much more discomforting might this be in students with stronger practitioner group identities?

2.8 COP and Discourse Practices in Academic Settings

The last feature outlined by Wenger (1998) as key to interactions between communities is discourse. While prominent in the third phase of CoP, discourse is inadequately covered in the earlier stages (Barton and Tusting, 2005). Yet, discourse practices in communities and education is significant, with Lea (2006, p.184) arguing that the most value from CoP for education is in understanding the 'contested nature of participation' experienced by those at the margins of communities, or who 'struggle to engage in the unfamiliar discourse of literacy practices of the academy'. Ivanič (2004, pp.234-5) suggests that literacy is inextricably linked to social setting, arguing that CoP offers a view

of the role of discourse in learning that differs from other learning theories. The view of discourse and writing as a transferable skill is widely criticised, particularly within academic literacies (Lea and Street, 1998). The idea of writing as a 'skill' here shifts to one of a 'complex, socially situated set of meaning-making practices', a view which is 'increasingly influential' (Gourlay, 2009, p.182).

2.8.1 Discourse Practices, Academic Literacies and Learning

For students, engagement with academic discourse requires them to 'giv[e] form to [their] experience by producing objects that congeal this experience into "thingness"' (Wenger, 1998, p. 58), and it is this 'making into an object' of the 'physical and conceptual artefacts' of engagement in a community (Wenger, 2010), which then measures the successful trajectory of the student from their novice position. Essay writing, then, can be viewed as embodying in concrete form the intellectual and experience resources of the student. This singular, perhaps abstract, object is used to measure the student against the 'regime of competence' of the academic setting. The resulting feedback acts as a further iteration of participation, developing the reified nature of academic discourse whether or not it leads to increased engagement. In this way 'participation and reification transform their relation' (Wenger, 1998, p.68). Indeed Lea (1998, p.156) views academic literacy as a 'mediating domain between adult students' wider cultural worlds and the final pieces of written work that they hand in for assessment', while Fenton-O'Creevy et al. (2015b, p.157), suggest that 'one way to describe the field of academic literacies is to consider genres as dynamic reflections of landscapes of practice...switching between writing styles and genres, between one setting and another in the landscape... [thereby handling] the social meanings and identities that each of those settings evokes'

This importance of academic literacy for students engaged in trajectories across HE is well recognised (Ivanič, 2004; Barton and Tusting, 2005; Barton and Hamilton, 2005; Lea, 2006; Lillas and Scott, 2007; Fenton-O'Creevy *et al.*, 2015a), and whilst CoP can be viewed as inadequately theorising transition in regard to literacy practices (Gourlay, 2009), Lea (2005) suggests that CoP model can

offer an understanding of discursive practices which contribute to the 'marginalisation and exclusion' of students, as well as supporting trajectories towards the core, and that the most value from CoP for education comes in an understanding of the 'contested nature of participation' experienced by marginalised students who 'struggle to engage in the unfamiliar discourse of literacy practices of the academy' (Lea, 2006, p.184).

Academic literacies draws on New Literacy Studies (Street, 1984; Barton, 1994; Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Lea and Street, 1998) locating interest in the educational aspects of writing in its 'cultural and social characteristics', and the 'social practices which surround the use of the written word' (Lea, 1998, p.158). It sees literacy as an embodiment of social settings, power and dynamics (Street, 1984), and was applied to HE by Lea and Street (1998).

It allies closely to CoP in its view of discourse as the mechanism for entry to a community, informing the understanding of power within this, particularly through the conceptualisation of domains of literacy practices, the 'structured, patterned contexts within which literacy is used and learned' (Barton and Hamilton, 2000, pp.11-12), something which Lea (2005) suggests had not been well conceptualised previously. It offers a 'methodology' for understanding contested meaning in HE, particularly the 'difficulties students have engaging in the dominant literacy practices of the academy' (Lea, 2005, p.192). Academic literacies, then, 'is not about acquiring decontextualized, transferable skills but is deeply concerned with issues of epistemology and what counts as knowledge in any particular context', which Lea (2005, pp.192-3) suggests aligns with CoP. Such alignments can also be seen in the relationships of power between the 'novice student' and 'expert academic' which 'are manifest in the divergent literacy practices surrounding written texts' (Lea and Street, 1998, pp.166-7), an issue particularly manifest in feedback processes, which implicitly asserts tutor expertise over the novice student's unknowing position.

In setting up multiple discourse practices, Lea and Street's (1998) model sees academic literacy as the ability 'to switch practices between one setting and another' (p.159), leading to challenges in

navigating differing discourse discipline norms. Issues arise from the differences between norms in settings, gaps between academic instruction and student interpretation and 'implicit' and 'conflicting and contrasting requirements' (Lea and Street, 1998, p.161) in multidisciplinary settings. While students may anticipate academic discourse to be similar to other practices (Hardy and Clughen, 2012), it is frequently not. Students are aware of the necessity for switching between literacy practices, but it requires the identification of appropriate approaches and 'adapting previous knowledge of writing practices, academic and other, to varied university settings' (Lea and Street, 1998, p.162). This is an issue for mature students who struggle to express their extensive experience and are used to succinct report writing (p.163).

Lea (1998) contextualises this further for mature students, locating literacy within 'cultural and social contexts' of academic literacy practices, and the texts with which students engage, and which are 'the result of socially situated processes rather than simple products of assessment' (p.158). For mature students this is not just a struggle between 'familiar ways of knowing and the academic ways of knowing, but with the different literacy practices that are associated with them' and which 'frequently conflict' with the constructions of knowledge they make in other settings (Lea, 1998, p.157). Lea (1998) identifies two approaches accommodating this, through the *reformulation of* and *challenging of* texts. *Reformulation* relates to the wider context of learning, adapting techniques to the academic setting, but is 'fundamentally concerned with an attempt to learn the discourse or appear to have mastered the process of academic socialisation through the replicating features of academic genres' in which students 'concede to the authority of the course texts' (Lea, 1998, pp.163-4). While such students may be seen by tutors as succeeding at the academic socialisation aspect of writing, Lea (1998, p.170) argues that using this approach means that students 'may be doing little more than reformulating received academic knowledge' having learnt to 'mask the influences that they bring to their studies from the broader cultural contexts within which they are studying'.

The *challenging* approach related to mature students' 'explicit desire' to contextualise learning to their social context, challenging academic conventions where these were at odds with students' views, so placing them at odds with tutor expectations, and thereby 'failing' (Lea, 1998, pp.164-170). Attempting to integrate assessed academic writing into wider social situations places mature students in positions which are 'fundamentally concerned with issues of confidence, power and identity in academic settings' (Lea, 1998, p.165, citing Ivanič, 1998). Lea (1998, p.165) argues that 'an understanding of what adult students bring to their studies and the relationships between the production of learning texts and the wider cultural social contexts within which they are learning' is key.

Literacy practices also have significant links to identity in communities, and Ivanič's (1998) exploration of writer identity suggests that 'through the discoursal construction of self in writing, students can assert or negate particular versions of self... thereby contributing to the reproduction or contestation of patterns of privileging among subject-positions within the academic community' (1998, p.332). In doing so mature students may utilise several versions of themselves, with an 'autobiographical self' reflecting an unconscious but deeply rooted sense of themselves, a 'discoursal' self, offering 'multiple, sometimes contradictory' (p.25) impressions, and a 'self as author' relating to the views, opinions and authority used, which may efface the literature or be strongly personal. These concepts of writer identity align to the contexts of writing, in which 'the constraints and possibilities open to a particular writer interact with the constraints on, and possibilities for, self-hood which are opened up by a particular occasion for writing' (p.28). Ivanič (1998, p.32) suggests that writing is always a personal process in which 'there is no such thing as impersonal writing', but practice writing is intended to be without personal bias or viewpoint, written as a function of an organisation. As such, while discoursal identity may be significant for academic writing, it may be problematic to locate alongside practice writing. However, Ivanič (1998, p.335) recognises this, and suggests research should 'look at how the same person constitutes their identity differently in different settings' as this would 'put academic literacy into perspective: a

person's identity is bound to prove much more diverse on such evidence, and it would be possible to trace interplay between different aspects of their lives'.

2.8.2 Discourse Practices Across Landscapes

Such explorations of discourse across academic/practice landscapes do exist, and do much to demonstrate the complexity of these settings. For example, Scott *et al.* (2014) echo Ivanič's call for research, seeking pedagogies which create spaces to accommodate and consider differing discourse practices. In their study of mature postgraduate students, they found academic literacies played a significant role in student transitions, and in a sense of exclusion from the academic community, often acting as point of crisis, with students inextricably tied to their 'positioning and previous experiences' and 'ongoing formations of identity', struggling with discourse engagement. This resulted in failures partially attributable to assessment practices which assume literacy as 'decontextualised and separate from disciplinary and social practices and relations' (Scott *et al.*, 2014, pp.102-3).

Also significant is Hallett's (2010) exploration of part-time postgraduate student experiences, which suggested that whilst institutional conceptions of students as deficit in academic skills led to student support provision focussing on this, students are seeking something more akin to an engagement with academic culture and community, especially where this had a discipline specific focus. Such engagement may itself be problematic, as Tobbell and O'Donnell (2013) found that the infrequent and incomplete interactions between students and staff reduced the potential for apprentice-style learning in academic communities and the opportunity to absorb academic requirements. This was also noted by Lea and Street (1998) and Barton and Hamilton (2005, p.19) who point out that practices may significantly contrast, as, for example, when collaboration in the workplace is viewed as plagiarism or collusion in the classroom. Research has noted that practitioners do not use literature to frame their problems, unlike academics (Nielson, 2010; Bartenuek and Rynes, 2014), and Askham (2008) observed that part-time mature students found academic discourse

expectations, including word limits and reference formats, challenging. Consequently, it is not surprising that Tobbell and O'Donnell (2015) identified that, for students, engagement with the differing academic practices was more problematic than knowledge acquisition.

Perhaps the most significant research of discourse as experienced across such landscapes of practice is that of Northedge (2003a). This exploration looked at an undergraduate, part-time social work programme. Northedge contrasts public, practice and academic discourse communities, making explicit use of CoP, arguing that such research is necessary to accommodate more diverse student populations. Northedge (2003a, p.19) views practitioner students as entering education equipped with styles and understanding which must be aligned to academic styles, and that such students 'come to academic discourse expecting it to complement the knowledge produced in their other life-worlds, but instead find it discordant and unsettling' (Northedge, 2003a, p.23). They are expected to negotiate between the 'pragmatic, controlled and defensive' practice discourse and a 'discursive universe where they are expected to set aside both public and professional rhetoric, and stand apart from their own actions... to position themselves as dispassionate debaters between competing theoretical accounts, even though these may undercut assumptions regarded as fundamental in their daily lives' (Northedge, 2003a, p.23).

Northedge suggest that students must 'develop *identities* ... so that they 'think' and 'speak' its discourse ... they cannot simply 'dip in' to the debates' (2003a, p.26, emphasis original), requiring a deep approach to learning, as without this 'their grades suffer, since their progress can only be registered though speaking the discourse' (Northedge, 2003a, pp.23-24). In attempting this, early career practitioner-students may utilise the dominant discourse patterns of practice in their academic writing, trying to maintain a consistent commitment to their roles, while more experienced practitioner-students struggle with novice academic roles, in which their practice knowledge carries little weight, requiring them to acquiesce to the views of 'faceless authors' (Northedge, 2003a, p.27). These shifts require students to 'exchange discursive identities, without

feeling disloyal, or shallow' and to find 'dialogues with which they feel they can comfortably engage' (2003a, pp.27-8).

While Northedge recognises complex trajectories across boundaries, these are perhaps more clearly articulated by Fenton-O'Creevy *et al.* (2015a) who also draw on academic literacies, in 'what practitioners on the periphery of a community (i.e. students) are allowed to profess and, more tellingly, the style in which they are required to express this knowledge' (Fenton-O'Creevy *et al.*, 2015a, p.49). These issues are felt to partly arise from differing expressions of competence, those being the workplace focus on practical application while the academic focus is on theoretical understanding and critical engagement, 'accentuated by the apparent gulf between academic prescription and the reality of life' (Fenton-O'Creevy *et al.*, 2015a, p.48). Part-time management students commented on these tensions as being similar to captaining a ship through a sea battle while also being asked to discuss the design of sails (Fenton-O'Creevy *et al.*, 2015a, pp. 59-60). As already discussed, this practice-academic gap is a significant feature of HRM, and so likely to feature in such student experiences.

2.9 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of several complex and interconnected areas of literature, exploring how these interact in the experiences of the students at the focus of this study.

The overviews of the both the HR setting and the wider part-time, mature and postgraduate setting have shown that these locations are not straightforward. The HR profession and the communities therein are fraught with tension, uncertain validity and disjointed interactions. Meanwhile the part-time, mature and postgraduate community is revealed as one of complex balances between study, employment and personal commitments, played out against scant resources of time and money, all of which interlink to create difficult balances. This setting is therefore one in which compromises are sought which cannot fully satisfy all the demands, creating a student experience which is filled with tensions.

These tensions are perhaps unsurprising given the complexity inherent in memberships of multiple communities of practice, and of the challenges which arise in satisfying the expectations and behaviours of differing community contexts. These liminal locations create experiences of studying which are framed not only in the contextual locations which drive the learning approaches adopted, but also in the conceptual sense of identity and membership of groups, and from this the ways in which individuals are viewed within such multiple memberships. Alongside this, the boundaries between academic and practice communities are perhaps most acutely felt in the discourse practices adopted within and across differing communities, impacting upon individuals.

Having explored these empirical and theoretical views of these experiences, the next chapter will explore how this study has attempted to develop an understanding of these.

3 Methodology

3.1 Introduction

An understanding of learning ‘need[s] to start with an understanding of the person – the learner’ (Jarvis, 2009, p.32), and the cultural context in which learning occurs. This leads to an epistemological and ontological stance of interpretivism, with a hermeneutic of the ‘interpretation of human action’ (Bryman, 2012, p.28), and a constructionism view of ‘social reality [as] an ongoing accomplishment of social actors rather than something external to them’ (Bryman, 2012, p.34). Within this view of reality as experienced and constructed, phenomenology offers opportunities for insight, given it ‘stud[ies] direct experience taken at face value’ (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, p.18). It places significance on personal experience, ‘how individuals make sense of the world’ (Bryman, 2012, p.30), their multiple perceptions of their social world and their reflections upon this. Consequently, this study takes an inductive, interpretive and qualitative approach, gathering students’ expectations and experiences. Whilst phenomenological methods offer a spectrum of differing strategies this study uses Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a technique which ‘attends to all aspects of this lived experience’ emphasising ‘the embodied, socio-cultural and historically situated person who inhabits an intentionally interpreted and meaningfully lived world’ (Eatough and Smith, 2008, p.181). Biggerstaff and Thompson (2008, pp.4-5) suggest that IPA offers ‘an epistemological stance whereby, through careful and explicit interpretative methodology, it becomes possible to access and individual’s cognitive world’. This approach to individual experience seen in the context of their world interpretation is reflected in the conceptual framework (shown overleaf), with its attendant focus on the lived experiences of practitioner-students. It is also reflected in the places where my own lived experience as a practitioner has informed or developed the plan, and this is evidenced in this chapter.

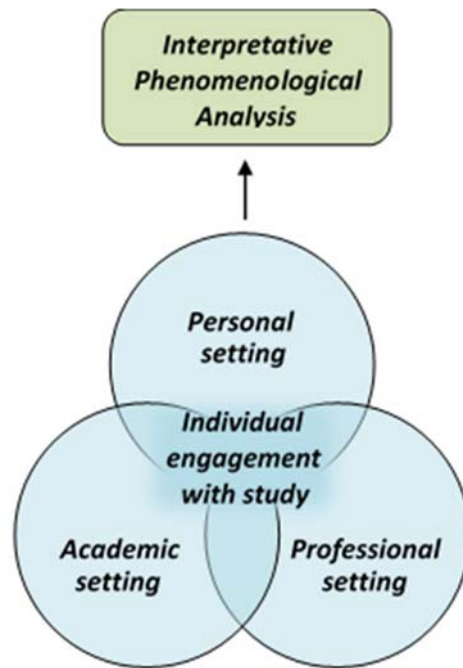


Figure 3.1: Conceptual Framework – Relationship to IPA

The chapter starts by looking at IPA as a research methodology within phenomenology, exploring its challenges and opportunities. This study involved three stages of data collection and analysis. A focus group was the source of initial data and the following one-to-one interviews drew on themes identified from it. Lastly, case studies (henceforth called vignettes) were developed to illustrate and interpret the experiences. This chapter also explores the research plan, and how it changed during the study. It additionally looks at issues around sampling, ethical concerns and data management. Next is a discussion of the data collection and analysis stages, beginning with the focus group technique. This provided the framework for the subsequent semi-structured interviews, so is discussed in depth. A contextualisation of semi-structured interviews follows this. Finally, this chapter discusses the use of case vignettes as both a presentational and analytical tool.

3.2 Phenomenology and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Understanding IPA as a research methodology and method requires exploring how three key characteristics, those being phenomenological, interpretive and idiographic, have influenced the design of the research.

3.2.1 *Introducing IPA*

IPA was developed in the mid-1990s by Jonathon Smith. It was primarily utilised in healthcare and psychology to provide a qualitative approach offering a similar level of methodological rigour to evidence-based quantitative methods (Biggerstaff and Thompson, 2008). It has subsequently expanded into allied fields such as education and a range of studies have appeared which seek to understand lived experience, including Cooper, Fleischer and Cotton's (2012) study of student learning experiences, Symeonides and Childs' (2015) study of online learners and Taylor's (2015) exploration of mature music students.

The three characteristics noted above arise from IPAs 'joint theoretical underpinnings in phenomenology and hermeneutics' (Eatough and Smith, 2008, p.179). It maintains a phenomenological concern with the 'inherent meaningful[ness]' of experiential engagement 'with things and others in the world' (Eatough and Smith, 2008, p.180), using an interpretative double hermeneutic view of thinking about the part and the whole, in an analytical process 'concerned with how a phenomena appears, and [in which] the analyst is implicated in facilitating and making sense of this appearance' (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.28), drawing therefore on the foundations of both Husserl and Heidegger. Finally, it has an idiographic focus, embodied in the personal, eschewing a nomothetic loss of individualism (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.29-32), and emphasising a phenomenological approach to thematic description using participants' words to illustrate the analysis (Starks and Trinidad, 2007, p.1376).

3.2.2 *IPA as a Phenomenological Approach*

IPAs phenomenological characteristic draws on the approaches of Husserl and Heidegger, specifically drawing on Husserl's use of 'bracketing' and reflection, along with Heidegger's interest in the embodied experience. It links the idiographic study of experience with an epistemological view of knowledge and an ontological view of being, and foregrounds not only direct experience but the importance of those events and interactions with others within our lifeworld. To do so it relies upon

the Husserlian ideas of 'intentionality', that is the experience of the world through concepts and ideas, and, significantly in this study, the intentionality of experience through discourse. Husserl encouraged this engagement through the use of bracketing, or suspension of judgement and experience, viewed 'not [as] a turning away from the world, but a turn towards it; world and objects shall be considered in an untainted fashion' (Lewis and Staehler, 2010, p.15). Husserl was searching for an engagement which moved past immediate appreciation (Moran, 2000, pp.161-3) to the inner and outer horizons of the objects beyond, requiring an interest and curiosity in the givenness of the object.

In practice IPA's engagement with reflection is emphasised (Smith Flowers and Larkin, p89), but also criticised (Brocki and Wearden, 2006) as the researchers' role is often unacknowledged. This tension can be seen in Husserl's argument that scientific reduction cannot support the indeterminacy of experience, and that perception is itself flexible and not absolute (Lewis and Staehler, 2010, p.35). This led Husserl not towards an essential proof of experience but to 'make sense ... of the Other in their otherness' (Lewis and Staehler, 2010, p.50). Whilst Husserl moved towards this understanding via transcendental phenomenology, IPA is 'more modest in scope' and places emphasis on the granularity of individual experience making it more 'fine-grained', arising from its idiographic focus (Eatough and Smith, 2008, p.182). Indeed, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009, p.38) argue that IPA relates to the earlier stages of Husserl's aims for phenomenology, suggesting that the later drive to unchanging and proven structures of experiences, whilst 'a noble aim' is not the priority for IPA studies.

IPA also draws on Heidegger's interest in hermeneutics, of interpretation in context. This is particularly relevant to education (Van Manen, 1997), suggesting its appropriateness for this study. Heidegger questioned the emphasis on 'bracketing', refuting this as removing the history and meaning embodied within the world, so removing the means of understanding. Instead, Heidegger emphasised 'dasein', being-in-the-world, utilising the 'especial capacity to be open or responsive to

the meaningfulness that is already inherent in factual, empirical things' (Lewis and Staehler, 2010, p.69). To do so inherently requires an immersion in the lived world which 'bracketing' could fail to accommodate. Heidegger suggests that, as meaning is not always apparent in experience, to perceive these 'concealed' or 'hidden' aspects requires a distance to achieve an analytical viewpoint.

Whilst the interest in embodied experience supports an informed engagement of experience, it is unable to do this without hermeneutical interpretation, the second characteristic of IPA.

3.2.3 IPA as an Interpretive Hermeneutic

Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009, p.37) suggest that 'without the phenomenology, there would be nothing to interpret; without the hermeneutics, the phenomenon would not be seen'. IPA is seen as particularly supporting Heidegger's hermeneutics of factual life (Eatough and Smith, 2008, p.180, citing Moran 2000) through the attention paid to the individuals' meaning making, doing so via the double hermeneutic circle, that of the participant interpreting and retelling their own experience and the subsequent interpretation of this by the researcher. This linked cycle of interpretation allows an engagement with lived experience, albeit at one remove, with the researcher being both 'like and unlike' the participant (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.37). That is, the researcher is engaged in human endeavour like the participant, but not engaged in the same situation, accessing this only through the lens of the participants account, thereby requiring an awareness of the influence of their own interpretation and lived experience.

The consequent analysis is a joint construction between researcher and participant, rather than an objective reality. Interviews act as an opportunity to construct reality in a way which would not occur elsewhere, one in which 'interviewees seem to enjoy the chance to "think aloud" about such matters' and with 'that thinking... directed at "major project" in their lives' (Glassner and Loughlin, 1987, pp.34-35, cited in Miller and Glassner, 2011 p.135). Murray and Holmes (2013, p.18) call into question the possibility of a 'coherent subject ... tasked with the straightforward description of an experience, but who does not question the how of his/her descriptions and experience'. Perhaps

successful attainment of this relies upon a second double heuristic, that of empathy and suspicion, in which IPA may occupy a middle ground of questioning, taking both ‘the participants view ... stand[ing] in their shoes’ and simultaneously ‘stand[ing] alongside the participant, to take a look at them from a different angle, ask questions, and puzzle over the things they say’ (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.36). As such, interpretation of experience is not simplistic, but an analysis where the researcher actively questions accounts, and in doing so engages with the participant in the recreation of the lived experience for the purposes of understanding the phenomenon.

3.2.4 IPA as an Idiographic Approach

IPA places emphasis, not an objective truth, but on the understanding of individual experiences (Reid, Flowers and Larkin, 2005), and as such it is ‘resolutely idiographic’, ‘shift[ing] in focus from establishing causal laws to a concern with understanding meaning in the individual life’ (Eatough and Smith, 2008, p.183). IPA focuses on the ‘meaning of an experience ... to a given participant, and recognises the significance for that participant’ (Larkin and Thompson, 2012, p.102), creating an emphasis on personal accounts of experience. Along with the interpretive hermeneutic epistemology, this enables the development of an understanding of the discreet and unique experiences of individuals in an immersed ‘linguistic, relational, cultural and physical world’ (Larkin and Thompson, 2012, p102). IPA is therefore engaged with ‘the embodied, socio-cultural and historically situated person who inhabits an intentionally interpreted and meaningfully lived world’ (Eatough and Smith, 2008, p.181). As such, it is helpful as it ‘attends to all aspects of this lived experience’ with an ‘emphasis on “what it is like to be experiencing this or that for this particular person”’ (Eatough and Smith, 2008, p.181), supporting this idiographic emphasis.

3.2.5 IPA and Other Interpretative Methods

IPA is not the only interpretative approach and comparing it to other methodological stances is informative. There is, for example, a significant commonality, described as a ‘family resemblance’ (Rapley, 2011, p.276) between the analysis stages of IPA, grounded theory and thematic analysis.

One can, in addition to finding differences, identify concepts that can be seen across the techniques, particularly analytical coding, the use of theory in analysis, and the seeking of saturation.

Rapley's (2011, pp.274-275) commonality is apparent in the coding stages, as whilst the language of labelling may differ in the processes of initial and subsequent analysis (ordinate and super-ordinate themes in IPA, initial codes and themes in thematic analysis, and nominal and axial coding in grounded theory) the techniques are often very similar. Likewise, the processes of checking and comparison (i.e. grounded theory's constant comparison), and reflection upon the analysis process are common to all three. However, IPA requires close and detailed coding of *all* transcripts, something grounded theory does not (Wertz *et al.*, 2011, p.293). Charmaz summarises the linkages and comparisons as an inside/out continuum with grounded analysis 'concentrat[ing] on a fundamental part of the experience ... [to] gain insight into the whole of [an] experience' while phenomenological analysis 'concentrates on the whole of [an] experience ... [to] better understand the parts' (Charmaz in Wertz *et al.*, 2011, p.297).

A further partly shared feature is the implicit use of theoretical constructs within analysis (Larkin, Watts and Clifton, 2006, p.104), placing IPA closer to the engagement with literature encouraged within informed grounded theory approaches, where existing theory is used as a 'data sensitising principle' in a 'sensitive, creative and flexible way' (Thornberg, 2012, p.257). This contrasts with the setting aside of extant theory in the grounded theory of Glaser and Strauss (Charmaz, 2006). Here IPA aligns with the emphasis placed, by Trafford and Lesham (2008, p.87), on meta-cognitive conceptual frameworks. They posit that failure to achieve synchronicity between the corpus and research methodology could lead to a 'focus on research methods at the expense of concepts ... uncoordinated research strategies ... [and a] lack of explicit or cohesive relationships throughout the research'. Indeed, when comparing the approaches Charmaz points out that whilst grounded theory may aim to test hypothesis and build theory, phenomenological methods explicitly do not do so (in

Wertz *et al.*, 2011, p.294). Smith and Osborn (2008) suggest that the latter avoids the risk of generalised claims which may lack understanding of individual experience.

Finally, IPA's idiographic analysis requires a 'highly intensive and detailed analysis of the accounts produced by a comparatively small number of participants' (Larkin, Watts and Clifton, 2006, p.130), in contrast to grounded approaches which moves towards broader engagement with larger samples. No attempt to achieve saturation is made in IPA, due to its idiographic nature, which distinguishes it from grounded theory (Larkin, Watts and Clifton, 2006, p.104).

3.2.6 IPA as an Analytical Approach

Despite the analytical emphasis of IPA, no single approach prevails (Larkin, Watts and Clifton, 2006; Smith and Osborn, 2008; Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). It can be 'characterised by a set of processes ... and principles ... which are applied flexibly, according to the analytical task' (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.79). Indeed, Larkin, Watts and Clifton had earlier described IPA analysis as 'a "stance" or perspective from which to approach the task of qualitative data analysis, rather than a distinct method' (2006, p.104). The aim is to produce 'an organised, detailed, plausible and transparent account of the meaning of the data' (Larkin and Thompson, 2012, p.104).

The analytical process can be described as following a pattern of;

- Line by line analysis of the participant accounts through 'free' and 'open' coding
- Identification of emergent patterns or themes from these accounts, in such a way which allows subsequent presentation of the data to be traced to the data source
- Utilisation of cumulative pattern, metaphor and imagery, abstraction of initial coding and interrogation of this coding
- Use of 'dialogue' between the researcher, their theoretical knowledge, and the coded data to develop interpretation, albeit with theory used 'cautiously'
- Use of audit, whether by supervision or other means, to test and develop the interpretation

- Development of framework or guide for this thematic interpretation, and a narrative account which emphasises the participants accounts
- Reflection on the researcher's perceptions and processes

(developed from Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, and Larkin and Thompson, 2012)

Smith, Flowers and Larkin emphasise that this is subject to 'a constant shift' between processes making the analysis ongoing until the point of writing up (2009, p.81). This comes about as a result of the 'sustained engagement' with the data, and with the 'process of interpretation' (Smith and Osborn, 2008, p.66). As will be seen later, this occurred over several stages in this study, especially through the development of case vignettes, each carried out individually and then cross-compared. This approach is recommended for IPA by Smith and Osborn (2008, pp.66-75) who offer a detailed account of the process of identifying themes. In summary these are;

- Multiple readings of an initial transcript to identify notable points, in a manner similar to free textual analysis (ordinate coding)
- Development of theme titles to encapsulate these groupings of notable points, which allow 'theoretical connections', but which remain 'grounded in the particularity of the specific thing said' (super-ordinate coding)
- An analysis of the connections between these themes, utilising clusters between themes where appropriate (thematic analysis)
- Returning from the themes to the source data to review for consistency and appropriateness on an iterative basis. This is heavily reliant on the interaction between the researcher and the source data.

As Rapley (2011) outlines, these steps echo many of the features of thematic analysis. Whilst not necessarily a specific methodological tradition, use of thematic analysis as a description of analytical methods has grown significantly, and specific techniques such as 'Framework' have been developed

(Bryman, 2012, pp.578-81). Whilst this offers freedom from theoretical bindings (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.81) it is less favoured than both IPA and grounded methods (Robson, 2011, p.477, citing Braun and Clarke, 2006). For this study a fluid approach has been taken, echoing the fluidity inherent in IPA. The analytical methods used draw heavily on Ryan and Bernard's (2003) suggestions, as these hold significant commonality with those given for IPA (for example by Smith and Osborn, 2008 and Larkin and Thompson, 2012). This commenced with the process of transcription and through the search for significant features, particularly repetitions, similarities and differences. The location of 'local terms' (Ryan and Bernard, 2003, pp.89-90) became helpful. One instance is the use of directional language such as 'working backwards' to describe approaches to engaging with discourse seen across the majority of the participants. The analysis reflects both the inductive, data driven, 'bottom up' and deductive, theoretical, 'top down' approaches categorised by Braun and Carke (2006) and thereby supportive of both 'emergent' and 'conceptualised' data analysis. An awareness of the necessity for the bracketing of my own presuppositions has been maintained throughout.

In order to make these differing stages of data collection and interpretation clear, the discussion now sets out the approach taken to the collection and analysis of the data during the project.

3.3 The Research Plan

This section outlines the original research plan, and the adaptations required in response to changes at the university which affected the study. It also explores appropriate sampling, ethical concerns and data management.

3.3.1 The Original Plan

The intention was to utilise the 2013/14 and 2014/15 part-time cohorts of the MSc Human Resource Management programme at University X. Interactions with two cohorts were intended to enable comparisons and offer a broader participant spread than a single group. Two data collection points for each cohort were planned.

The initial data collection would be a focus group, to occur during induction, capturing early impressions of parallel work/study and expectations rather than experiences. This data collection would employ the consensus workshop focus group technique, discussed later in this chapter. This would be followed by semi-structured interviews with between three and six practitioner-students from each cohort, taking place at the end of the first full year. These were planned to utilise narrative enquiry and critical incident discussions, supported visual prompts such as photographs. The initial focus group analysis, along with theoretical frameworks from the literature, would be used to develop a broad questioning structure. This use of images in interviewing is suggested as helping to 'ground the interviewer's questions' (Bryman, 2012, p.480) and has been used within studies of identity, biography and 'work worlds', for some time (Harper, 2002, 13-18). Gauntlett (2007, pp.106-107) stated that 'show[ing] the interviewee photographs – usually to do with their own social world – and ask[ing] questions about the pictures and their meanings' combines image and discussion to 'form a meaningful package... which can be used alongside other [methods] to help... understand how participants see their visual worlds'. Photo elicitation has been found to support discussion of 'more difficult, abstract concepts' (Gilbert, 2003, p.2, citing Curry and Stauss, 1994; Bender *et al*, 2001), providing a 'means of getting inside' and 'promote[s] longer, more detailed interviews in comparison with verbal interviews' (Gilbert, 2003, p.3).

This longitudinal approach, in line with the nature of phenomenological research, would have provided wider data across two cohorts, alongside detailed data from between six and twelve individuals, representing between one-third and one-half of the cohorts. In hindsight, this level of data would have proven overwhelming to analyse fully using IPA, given the level of depth required.

3.3.2 The Adapted Plan

The research plan became unfeasible when falling student recruitment numbers meant that the programme was pulled for academic year 2013/14. This reduction in numbers can be identified as part of the wider trend, perhaps exacerbated by the reliance on employer funding, and the falling

number of employers offering this support within HRM (Stewart, Mills and Sambrook, 2015). The study was suspended at this point, recommencing after a six-month hiatus.

During the suspension of the project alternative routes to this student population were explored, including moving the study to another university, an approach which was felt to present possible problems of access, and refocusing from a longitudinal study to a reflective one. Exploration suggested this was both achievable and realistic, and it became the focus. The reframed approach engaged the outgoing cohort of students with taking a reflective look back over their three-year programme. The study retained the two stage data collection, with a focus group and one-to-one interviews. Using image elicitation to support the interviews became unnecessary, as the initial informal pilot produced rich data for discussion, thereby reducing the necessity for such visual prompts.

This pilot stage significantly helped to shape the eventual design. The use of such pilots within IPA is encouraged (Smith and Osborn, 2008, p.61) and the initial informal pilot was conducted with a group of HR professionals who had completed similar part-time postgraduate programmes. The sample was made through personal contacts, and was intended to provide some indication of the likelihood of the topic being felt relevant and appropriate to the participants. The results were highly reassuring, and helped to direct the approach, and the language used, in the subsequent data collections.

Whilst the remainder of this chapter discusses in depth the decisions taken in the design and execution of this research plan, Figure 3.2 summarises the differing stages of data collection and analysis following the pilot. It charts the progression of the research through the focus group and interview stages, reflecting as it does the shifting interest from the initial focus on the experiences of academic writing to the broader exploration of CoP.

Stage one of the data collection and analysis consisted of the focus group and subsequent data analysis. The pilot had informed the development of the focus group question (see Section 3.5), framing this around experiences of academic writing across academic-practice boundaries. The focus group provided two outputs, the consensus framework (see Figures 3.3 to 3.5 for the stages of this process, and Table 3.1 for a summary of the output), but also the discussion therein. This was analysed using both an emergent analysis using IPA principles, and themes identified from the literature. See Figure 3.6 for diagram of this initial analysis.

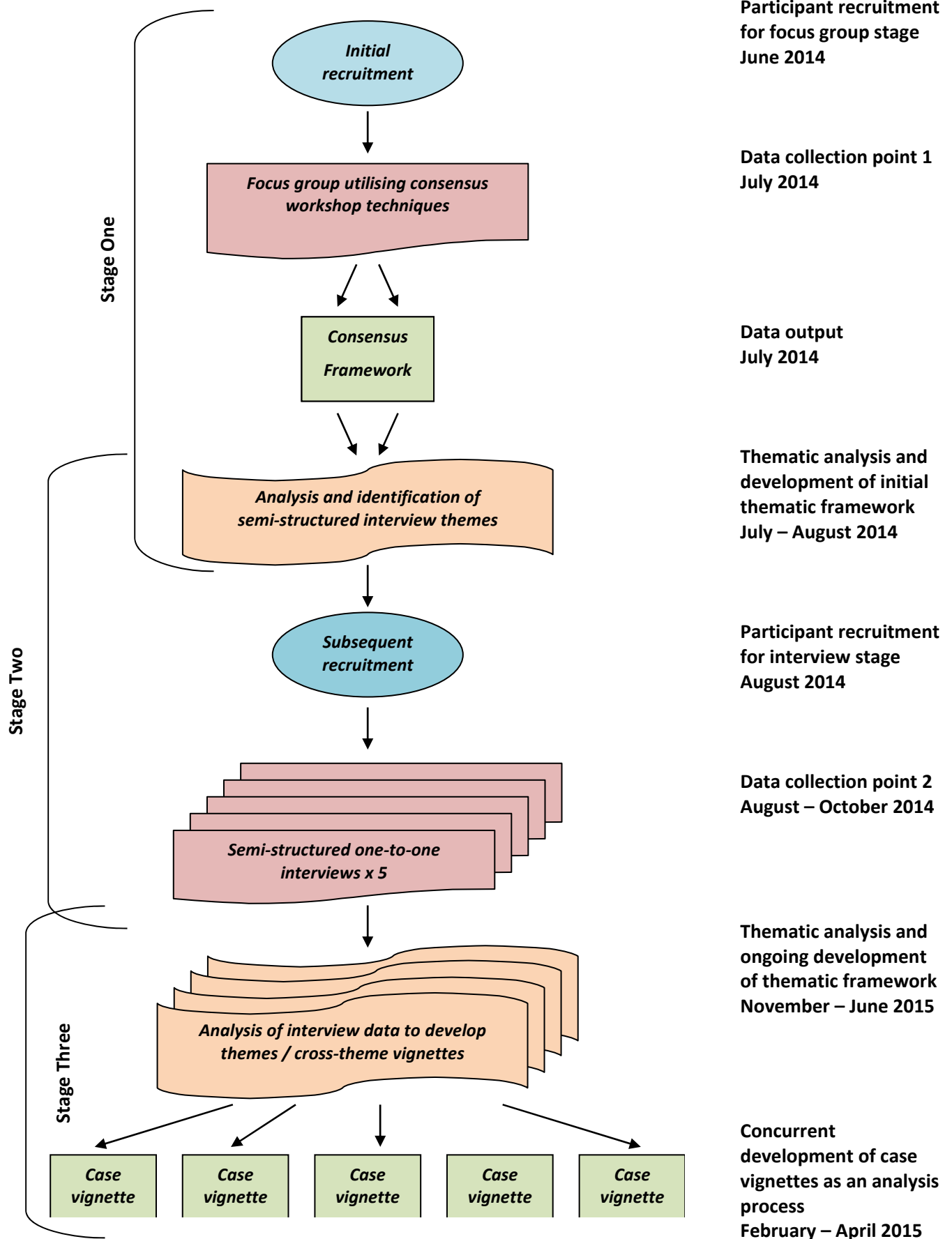
This analysis, and the identification of the significance of relationships between practitioner-students, other students, and their academics, informed the interview process (see Section 3.6). This interview schedule was individually developed for each participant, drawing on the data collected in the first stage where possible (see Appendix 1 for an example), both to provide confirmation of the earlier data, but also to expand upon this.

The third stage was the analysis of all the collected data. The interview data was analysed, again using IPA emergent coding and the themes from the literature, but also against the initial emergent themes from stage one, as well as the consensus framework clusters developed in that stage.

Together all of the data collected for each participant was then developed into case vignettes (see Section 3.7 for a discussion and Appendix 3 for the full vignettes).

Overleaf, Figure 3.2 captures these three stages and additionally identifies the recruitment processes (highlighted in blue), data collection stages (in red), specific discrete outputs such as the consensus and vignettes (in green) and the analysis stages (in orange). Combined, these three stages provided an approach to data collection which developed over time, and which is explored more fully in the following pages.

Figure 3.2: Stages of Data Collection and Analysis



3.4 Ethical Issues

Paying careful attention to ethical issues has been an integral part of the research plan. In considering this aspect of the project the four-fold framework for ethical analysis proposed by Diener and Crandall (1978, cited in Bryman, 2012, p.135) was used. It specifically focuses on harm to participants, informed consent, privacy and deception. In addition, issues of access and sampling were considered and addressed in line with IPA approaches. Finally, concerns around data management, and compliance with the requirements of the Data Protection Act (1998) were addressed. Compliance with Northumbria University's Research Ethics and Governance Handbook (2014) has been maintained throughout.

3.4.1 Institutional Ethical Approval

An application for ethical approval for the original proposal was submitted in June 2013, with consent given in July 2013. Advice was provided on the ability to withdraw consent, and the use of critical friending during the analysis process, which aligns with the guidance on IPA. When the project had to be reframed, the adapted plan was discussed with the supervision team, and whilst the intended participants had changed from year one part-time postgraduates to year three, it was agreed that these did not constitute significant changes overall, and as such re-approval was not required. Whilst some issues around disclosure of sensitive personal circumstances arose (discussed below), nothing falling within the 'adverse effects' policy occurred.

3.4.2 Access, Sampling and Informed Consent

Sampling is an issue which straddles ethics and research design. Within phenomenology, as the emphasis is not on generalizable theory, but on rich description, discrete and homogenous samples are normal. Within IPA, researchers are urged to locate sample sizes which 'provide sufficient cases for the development of meaningful points of similarity and difference...but not so many that one is in danger of being overwhelmed' (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.51). More prosaically, this is defined as 'between three and six participants' (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.51), with a

suggestion of perhaps 'four participants interviewed twice' (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.52) for professional doctorates, in line with this study of five, of which four were interviewed twice.

Given the nature of IPA investigations, practitioner-students' experiences were the key focus, not those of others such as teaching staff, employers or colleagues in the students' professional lives. In particular, as 'participants are viewed as the experiential experts of the topic under investigation' (Eatough and Smith, 2008, p.188, citing Smith and Osborn, 2003), interviewing academics or employers on their view of the lived experience of students was felt to be inappropriate, as this would result in a quadruple heuristic, of the reader, trying to interpret the researcher, trying to interpret the academic or employer, who is in turn trying to interpret the experiences of the student, thereby placing further distance between the reader/researcher and the experience.

The sample was identified as those with parallel work/study lives and extended in the reframed plan to include other practitioner-students simultaneously in employment and study in HRM, as a potential participant who was studying on a full-time basis during a sabbatical period due to personal circumstances had been identified. Ten students were approached, of which seven were willing to participate in the process. Contact with two of them proved unsustainable, creating a group of five participants, in line with IPA recommendations. As all the participants were over 18, they were considered capable of giving consent, following appropriate procedures informing them about the nature of the research. Such information and consent was achieved through the use of range of invitations and consent forms.

Having identified the sample, recruitment and consent involved the Programme Leader, who acted as a Gatekeeper. Use of Gatekeepers, common when seeking access to closed communities (Robson, 2011, p.211), can be fraught with political issues, ranging from concerns around a researcher's motives, to the portrayal of individuals involved in the research (Bryman, 2012, p.151), potentially restricting access (Robson, 2011, pp.211-12). Benefits of gaining access via Gatekeepers include the legitimatising of the research through the endorsement by a trusted figure, an effect

which can be inferred in the positive response from the cohort to the research invitation. However negative effects such as coercion may occur, with participants feeling that the Gatekeeper requires participation.

This concern was exacerbated by the initial focus group activity being scheduled after a timetabled class. To mitigate this, the information provided prior to the focus group and interviews via the invitations, participant information sheets and consent forms, gave detailed explanations, and avoided any sense of obligation of participation, thereby reflecting the Social Research Associations' Ethical Guidelines (cited in Bryman, 2012, p.138). Regarding individual interviews, an inference of coercion could again have occurred, and was tackled with reassurances about opting-out and an explanation of the nature and focus of the interviews, reinforced via consent forms and verbally at each interview. Opportunities to withdraw informed consent were provided at each stage of the process, including the final stage of sharing the case vignettes with the participants.

Whilst exposing the research focus to the participants during recruitment processes may have affected decisions to take part, this was outweighed by concerns to avoid deception. This is defined as occurring 'when researchers represent their work as something other than what it is' (Bryman, 2012, p.143) effectively obscuring the research focus in order to support data collection. In this project, a full disclosure of the intention of the research was made via the participant information sheets and other materials.

3.4.3 *Privacy and Anonymity*

A key issue was the collective nature of focus groups, which may present ethical issues around the lack of anonymity and privacy (Parahoo, 2007, p.5). However, the emphasis on the collective as the unit of analysis within focus groups is argued to render such concerns inappropriate (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2013, pp.85-99). In this study the participants were already part of a community of peers, likely to have discussed such issues socially. In addition, the subsequent one-to-one interviews offered confidential space.

Privacy was supported throughout via appropriate anonymity and confidentiality, emphasised in the participant information sheets and consent forms and in compliance with Data Protection principles. Another step taken to support anonymity was the use of pseudonyms for participants in the analysis and writing up of the research. It felt inappropriate to impose a pseudonym, so participants were asked to identify what name they would like to use. As no participants specified one, the names given were chosen based upon the colour of the paper they chose for the focus group (so a participant choosing green paper was named Grace, using the 'G' to lead this choice).

Despite this it is difficult to fully anonymise the lived experiences of individuals, given the ease which with those who know them well could recognise aspects of distinct experience, an issue noted by Punch and Oancea (2014, p.69) as particularly problematic in educational settings. It was clear throughout that participants were aware of this, and frequently made reference to ensuring that organisations or individual were not named, included self-censoring during interview. It may be that the nature of the participants' employment within HR, and the issues of confidentiality implicit in this field of employment led to a heightened awareness of this and hence to self-censoring.

Consequently, care was taken to ensure that no interim publication of the research outputs included any details which would identify the participants.

3.4.4 The Avoidance of Harm to Participants

The likelihood of harm to the participants was initially felt to be limited, with no element of physical or developmental risk, or blameworthy, damaging activity present in the plans (Dierner and Crandall, 1978, cited in Bryman, 2012, p.135). However, given the potential for discussion topics to include recalling and discussing stressful experiences, it was recognised that appropriate, respectful steps would need to be taken, for example framing questions in the interviews to acknowledge this.

Discussions of topics such as unhappiness at work, or academic misconduct were possible, which if publically revealed could potentially harm participants, again emphasising the importance of anonymity.

Smith and Osborn (2008, p.64) emphasise that within IPA semi-structured interviewing an intuitive and empathic approach to the phrasing and sequencing of questions is important. In interview, significant personal circumstances had often impacted on the experience, and appropriate steps were taken to support discussion. These ranged from a sensitive listening where it was clear that the participant did not wish to discuss these issues, through a careful pacing and rephrasing of questions, and the avoidance of probing 'funnelling' questions if inappropriate. This awareness enabled a sensitive and appropriate management of issues that arose. Furthermore, during the analysis and case vignette writing process, care was exercised to include only appropriate material, and to frame this in terms which did not excessively expose the participant's personal situation. Despite this, one participant expressed concerns about re-reading the lived experience, whilst still wishing to participate. In handling this, I drew significantly upon my previous experience as an HR professional, where I had dealt with similarly sensitive matters. In the end the participant was happy to take part, and appeared to find the process cathartic, if emotionally charged.

3.4.5 The Management of Data

The appropriate management of data included compliance with Data Protection principles, with participants' details separated from recordings and notes, in secure online or locked physical storage. In particular, the data key, which contained the information which would identify the participants, was held separately to the data itself, and pseudonyms were used at the earliest possible stage. Only data relevant to the research was collected. For example, data such as ethnicity or religion was not requested from the participants, and personal data regarding educational or employment details was immediately anonymised. As well as communicating this via the recruitment and consent processes, this was supplemented by oral consent at the commencement of the interviews.

As IPA requires a verbatim first person account in which 'the researcher is aiming to capture an account that is rich, detailed and reflective ... [it] is not about collecting facts, it is about exploring

meanings' (Larkin and Thompson, 2012, p.104). Detailed and comprehensive objective records of the data are required, and Smith and Osborn suggest that 'it is not possible to do the form of interviewing required for IPA without tape recording (2008, p.64). The focus group was videoed, capturing the consensus clustering process, while the interviews were tape-recorded. Bryman (2012, p.504) emphasises the importance of recording and transcription in focus groups to capture the detail of overlapping discussions of multiple participants, and the creation of combined understanding through interaction. These recordings were transcribed following the guidelines given for IPA, in which transcription needs to be methodical and complete, forming a 'semantic record' of the participant/researcher interaction, including notes of events such as laughter or pauses, but not to the level required for discourse analysis, for example, where the exact length of pauses is needed (Smith and Osborne, 2008, p.65; Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.74). To this end, rather than line numbering the transcription, the extracts used are time-coded to the point in the interview, enabling a less fragmentary link back to the interview or focus group, and making clear the later asynchronous presentation of these through the case vignettes and analysis.

The transcription was carried out by the researcher, maintaining privacy and reducing costs. Although not time effective, on reflection this formed an important part of the early data analysis process, enabling a slow-paced and significant immersion into the discussions at a level which was not possible in the actual interview. As the transcription did not occur until some time after the interviews, this enabled a fresh look at the data which, alongside the field notes made at the time to capture the immediate thoughts on the interview, allowed fresh and often surprising perspectives to emerge. At points the discussion seemed irrelevant, but would progress to useful and often key data. This was reassuring, suggesting a consistent, yet flexible approach.

Following transcription, the data was then transferred into NVivo10, and the subsequent thematic analysis of the data was carried out using Nvivo and manual approaches. The use of computer software within IPA did not initially have much prominence, but later guides have incorporated this

(see Larkin and Thompson, 2012, p.111). Given the extensive amounts of data collected, over forty-six thousand words, it would have been impractical to do without the support of software. Although it can never replace the role of the researcher in interpretation, such software is to be recommended.

Alongside this manual data analysis process have been used, most notably the 'cutting and sorting' technique of Ryan and Bernard (2003 pp.94-6). This also led to insights, most notably in the early analysis of the focus group, where, for instance, 'other students' was identified as a category (see Figure 3.6: Initial Analysis of the Emergent Themes from the Focus Group Discussions), thereby informing the design of the interview schedule. This combination of approaches to manipulating the data led to a rich understanding that is both embedded in the individual experience and supportive of cross-case comparison.

Whilst the research plan provides a context for the approach taken, a more detailed explanation of each of the techniques is necessary, and this is explored next.

3.5 Focus Groups as an Initial Stage of Data Collection and Analysis

Whilst not typically used in IPA, the first stage of the data collection was a focus group, utilising an approach rarely visible in academic research.

3.5.1 Focus Groups and their Use Within IPA

Whilst Barbour (2007, pp.18-9) advised against multi-stage data collections using focus groups, fearing that the competing voices of the participants would make individual narratives difficult to pick out, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009, pp.52-3) suggest such multiple stage measures potentially offer a 'more detailed and multifaceted account'. However, focus groups are uncommon in IPA (Brocki and Wearden, 2006, p.92-93) and are suggested as 'less obviously suitable' IPA's idiographic focus (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, pp.71), so a technique which can balance the individual with the collective, thereby resonating with the idiographic focus of IPA, is needed. To this end the

Consensus Workshop technique developed by the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA) (see Stansfield, 2002) was used as it can be adapted to retain the individual voice whilst offering the rich data found in group discussions. This section begins by looking at focus groups and data collection, and the issues these present for IPA, moving on to an exploration of how adapting the ICA consensus workshop has made focus groups an effective approach for IPA.

3.5.2 Focus Group Development Within Research

Historically, focus groups developed from work in marketing, particularly the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University's exploration of propaganda campaigns in the 1940s. This was subsequently extended by Robert Merton and Paul Lazarsfeld (i.e. Bloor *et al.*, 2001 Morgan, 2001). Further development in the 1980s saw the use of focus groups as a method for social enquiry (Happell, 2007), drawing away from the origins of the approach (Morgan, 2001, pp.142-3). However, given that the technique straddles the boundaries of academic research and applied business practices, means it has a synchronicity with the subject of this study that makes it appropriate.

Focus groups are thought to provide an efficient approach to research, offering opportunities to gather 'complex information...with the minimum amount of time' (Liamputtong, 2011, p.2). Located between individual interviews and 'collective conversations' (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2013, p.6) or large scale participant observations (Liamputtoong, 2011), focus groups provide a way of situating the individual experience within the wider social context and are therefore relevant to phenomenological studies (see Liamputtong, 2011, citing Conradson, 2005; Rubin and Rubin, 1995). Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2013, p.6) view them as offering 'perfect sites for empirical investigations of ... theoretical formulations of self ... [giving]... opportunities to see whether and how "self", "other" and "context" seem to be co-emergent phenomena'. Barbour suggests that focus groups offer an opportunity to gain 'a window on subjective experience' (2007, p.27), hence the use of this approach here.

3.5.3 Focus Groups as an Advantageous Technique

Focus groups are felt to be a powerful tool for engaging with lived experience, given their interactive nature. Early uses did not place emphasis on the interactions and collective nature of the methods (Kamerilis and Dimitradis, 2013, p.9), but later interpretations emphasised their significance suggesting that they had the ability to ‘capitalise on the richness and complexity of group dynamics’, and the ‘complex ways people position themselves in relation to each other as they process questions, issues and topics in focused ways’ (Kamerilis and Dimitradis, 2011, p.559). They are particularly effective at ‘making the invisible visible’, by bringing to the ‘surface eclipsed or invisible connections between and among constitutive social, cultural, and political structures and forces’ (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2013, p.40), thus offering the development of ‘higher levels of understanding of issues critical to... a group’s interests’ via ‘richer, thicker, and more complex levels of understanding’ (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2011, pp.545-560). This offers an opportunity to alter the situation studied, so promoting the interests and needs of the group. Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2011, p.559) argue that the interactive nature of the group provides ‘particularly powerful knowledges’ arising from the ‘synergistic potentials’ of collaborative methods, perhaps arising from the, ‘opportunit[ies to] probe each other’s reasons for holding a certain view’ (Bryman, 2012, p.503). Similarly, they ‘decentralis[e]’ the role of the researcher (Kamberilis and Dimitradis, 2011, p.560) shifting the power dynamic, allowing participants to ‘bring to the fore’ their issues (Bryman, 2012, p.503) and so have political impact.

The collective sharing of similar experiences allows voices to be heard which have been ‘otherwise constructed as idiosyncratic’ (Kamberilis and Dimitradis, 2013, p.27, citing the work of Madriz, 2000) encouraging participants to challenge inconsistencies (Bryman, 2012, p.503), and to support and reinforce jointly held views. Focus groups are supportive of ‘reluctant’ participant contributions (Barbour, 2007, pp.19-20) and offer ‘a development process which supports... members to clarify, extend and review their understanding...[and]...a means by which knowledge can be co-constructed’ (Cousins, 2009, pp.51-52). Much of this richness comes from how focus groups bring out ‘subtexts’

and 'breakdowns', meaning unspoken and problematic accounts of the experience, enabling reflection on them (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2013, pp.76-81). In terms of the unspoken Barbour suggests that focus groups have the potential, due to the collective atmosphere, to access topics of non-compliance, which may not appear in individual interviews due to fear of criticism (Barbour, 2007, pp.24-6).

3.5.4 Focus Groups as a Problematic Technique

Focus groups do have disadvantages and are often viewed negatively, or seen as inferior to individual interviews, although this may be due to familiarity of interviewing (Morgan, 2001, pp.150-1). Disadvantages are seen as arising from the interaction of participants. Commonly cited issues include loss of focus, group speak and dominant voices (Bryman, 2012, pp.517-8, Happell, 2007, pp.21-3), as well as the challenge for the researcher to identify individual voices in the analysis process (Bryman, 2012, pp.508-17). The ICA process can help to overcome these issues. Indeed, such interactions can be seen as positive, making groups easier to conduct, as an engaged group can sustain conversation without any intervention from the facilitator (Morgan, 2001, p.151). In this context, group speak is not a problem of distortion, but an area of interest, and where differences between views expressed in a group and those expressed confidentially exist lies an interesting area for exploration.

A further issue is that of sampling. Arguments for and against homogenous samples exist, with Liamputtong (2011, pp.34-41) supporting homogenous groups, while Morgan (2002, pp.152-3) fears these potentially limit the range of responses to the data. The use of pre-existing social groups is suggested as effective by Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2013, pp.62-4) enabling less problematic recruitment and a richer discussion, although they may bring with them additional complex power dynamics (Robson, 2011, p.295). Recommended sizes vary, but smaller groups of 4 to 6 potentially offer an opportunity to explore topics in greater detail. Overall, a tendency towards smaller groups appears in the social sciences (Barbour, 2007, pp.59-60), perhaps forming one of a series of multiple

focus groups, encompassing different variables from a population (Liamputtong, 2011, pp.44-6). This can provide the researcher with a firmer grounding to demonstrate patterning of the data (Barbour, 2007, pp.59-60). However, it could produce overwhelming data sets, and whilst saturation is frequently encouraged (Kreuger and Casey, 2015, pp.23-8) this may not be appropriate (Liamputtong, 2011, p.45).

3.5.5 Focus Groups Utilising 'Consensus Workshop' Technique; Overcoming the Disadvantages, Retaining the Ideographic

The design of the focus group discussion is important, and in this study the use of the consensus workshop technique was very significant. The technique was developed by the ICA, a not-for-profit organisation 'concerned with equipping people to make a difference in communities and organisations' (Stanfield, 2002, p.159). Training facilitators in this approach, alongside other techniques, is a significant aspect of its work. I was trained in it in 2009, and have used it in several teaching and research settings with some success.

The technique developed out of work with various community development initiatives initially, but evolved into a strategic business planning tool (Spencer, 1989). The approach owes a debt to techniques of brainstorming drawn from marketing and to the Delphi technique (Stansfield, 2002, pp.14-7). It is cited as an 'integrated approach to listening to reality and working with it', a 'transformational intent' which supports collaboration and 'protects the interest and concerns of the group' and which 'elicits radical participation' (Stansfield, 2002, pp.17-8). However, it should be noted that the ICA work in social development has been seen as having unclear motives and successes (see Wolcott, 1994, for his views on this). However, the technique remains valid and has been used to support participatory planning in universities in transitional economies (Umpleby, Medvedeva and Oyler, 2004), and to help frame research direction and question formulation within funded EU research (Downs, 2013), although it has been used little in formalised academic research, and as such its use in this project represents an innovation in practice.

The approach aims to elicit a broad range of information from participants, with the group then clustering and categorising the information provided across five stages (See Figure 3.3: Consensus Process - First Stage, Figure 3.4: Consensus Process - Subsequent Stage, Figure 3.5; Consensus Process – Completed and Named Clusters (photo) and Table 3.1: Consensus Process - Completed and Named Clusters (Transcribed With Later Additions))**Error! Reference source not found..** These stages emphasise individual data first, overcoming issues of convergence (Cronin, 2013). To some extent the term ‘consensus’ is misleading, suggesting as it does a singular, homogenous viewpoint, given that the process strives to retain and foreground differences of opinion whilst seeking agreement that difference exists within the group.

The first stages are aimed at setting a context for the discussion and cross fertilisation of ideas. In this ‘brainstorm’ phase participants are encouraged to develop their own thinking about the ‘focus question’. In this project the focus question was set as, ‘What impact has writing and discussing HRM in academic and workplace settings at once had on you?’. One approach to the ‘brainstorm’ phase is to use another ICA technique, the focussed conversation, which utilises a four stage discussion framework of observational, reflective, interpretative and decisional questions (see Stansfield, 2000), but alternatives such as Edward De Bono’s six thinking hats are also suggested. The questions used to prompt ideas leading up to the focus question were;

- When writing and discussing HRM, what similarities and differences have you noticed between the ways that it is done in employment and university settings?
- How has writing and discussing HRM in the two settings made you feel?
- How has writing and discussing HRM in the two settings affected you?

Participants were asked to respond to the first question in turn, to encourage full participation, and to break the ice, but little encouragement was needed. This reflects the suggestion that social groups are good loci for focus group research, as their common bond enables an immediate and enthusiastic response. Whilst this stage is intended as the precursor to the subsequent clustering stages, and therefore potentially overlooked as less significant in the process, these conversations

generated much of the material valuable in the initial thematic analysis, proving both informative and revealing.

The next stage is the elicitation of individual views. Participants were asked to consider their expectations of parallel work/study, and influences between these, and note their thinking on large cards. This is normally done in pairs, but to support the idiographic content of IPA this was carried out individually, with each participant given differently coloured card, thereby enabling identification of the author.

The subsequent stages use rounds of analysis by the participants to collate the individual ideas together, echoing the ordinate and subordinate analysis process of IPA. Presenting their highest ranked cards, these are placed on a 'sticky wall' and participants asked to identify and place related cards together. In this way data is both elicited and collated, and at this stage the focus is on the data held most significant across the group.

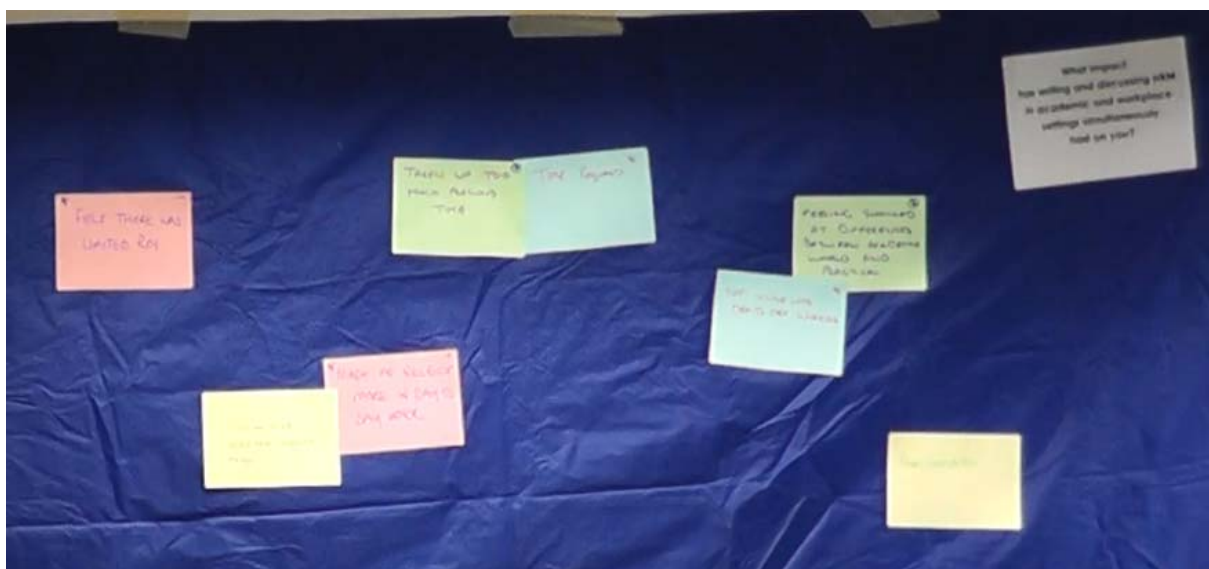


Figure 3.3: Consensus Process - First Stage

The next stage asked participants to add any cards differing greatly from those already offered. This makes divergent viewpoints visible, further supporting the idiographic approach of IPA study. It is this maintenance of the individual and divergent within this focus group technique which makes it

appropriate. These divergent cards are also then clustered by the participants. This technique holds much commonality with the steps outlined by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) and Smith and Osborn (2008) for analysis within IPA.



Figure 3.4: Consensus Process - Subsequent Stage

The clusters are tagged with a visual symbol, and participants add any remaining cards, tagging them to clusters as appropriate. The use of visual symbol and not a name at this stage is felt to be important to avoid 'premature judgement' of the cluster, as later discussion may reveal an underlying thematic link which is not immediately apparent (Stansfield, 2002, p.75).

Clusters are then discussed, ensuring group consensus on the data they contain and the name, or description of, the cluster. Both activities are carried out by the group, with the facilitator attempting to practise a non-interventionist, supportive but bracketed approach to this role. This places emphasis on the outcomes of the consensus workshop firmly within the participant's control.

Figure 3.5; Consensus Process – Completed and Named Clusters (photo) and Error! Reference

source not found. show the final consensus noting the initial and therefore most significant cards, colour coded for each participant, as well as two cards added later by one participant via email, having reflected on the discussions. As the colours are those of the cards used by the participants,

individual responses can be identified. These colours also led to the pseudonyms given to each participant (i.e. Yellow/Yvonne, Green/Grace, Blue/Brian, Pink/Polly).



Figure 3.5; Consensus Process – Completed and Named Clusters (photo)

The completed consensus is summarised overleaf.

What impact has writing and discussing HRM in academic and workplace settings at once had on you?					
	Negative emotional response to work versus university culture	Positive practical results	Time hungry	Value for money (questioning the value of academic study in practical workplace)	Personal emotional effect
Most important	Not in line with day-to-day working	Made me think about how I approach things	Taken up too much precious time	Felt there was limited return-on-investment	Fear – ‘Can’t do this’
	Feeling shocked at differences between academic world and practical	Made me reflect more in day-to-day work	Time required		
	Feel that experience wasn’t valid – too academic	Question / refresh my leadership style	Tired – time constraints with life and study	Made me question future academic learning	Led to feelings of disengagement
	Questioned ability / knowledge of lecturers	More aware of the impact I have on employees	Generated additional work		Caused frustration
	Shocking! University culture in writing reports	Signposted people in work to areas of development	Elongated business outcomes		
	Frustration between practical and academic	Has allowed the ‘theory’ not to be forgotten in business-as-usual work			
Added later			Family Support – the support and family time lost, due to course work (Evenings / Weekends)	Company Support – the support allowing time away from work and course payment fees.	

Table 3.1: Consensus Process - Completed and Named Clusters (Transcribed With Later Additions)

The benefit of the consensus workshop is that it makes visible interactions between multiple viewpoints and this was seen in the process;

'We've kind of just talked about that haven't we?' 'Yeah, we were just on about that.' (Polly and Brian, Focus Group – 7 min)

Focus groups generally 'mitigate or inhibit the authority of the researcher' (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2013, p.40). The consensus workshop ensures this by several means, including that of the decision making and clustering being undertaken by the group. The facilitator must be careful to avoid affecting the groups clustering choices, but this can be reduced through awareness of potential bias, in line with bracketing.

Stansfield's (2002, pp.14-20) discussion of the origins of the consensus workshop shows that it draws on several established focus group approaches, most notably Delphi technique or nominal groups, although they are rather different. Delphi technique is more distributed and focussed on a forward estimation, rather than on the reflection as in this study. Within Delphi iterative rounds of predictions or opinions are shared between participants, who then review their responses until a consensus is reached (Stewart, Shamdashi and Rook, 2007, pp.154-6). Whilst the iterative rounds are similar to the stages of the consensus, Delphi technique is normally done remotely and as such lacks the discursive and interactive elements of the consensus workshop, leading to a possible 'lack of clarity' over the group outputs (Robson, 2011, p.365). Nominal groups are often 'groups in name only' (Stewart, Shamdasani and Rook, 2007, p.153) lacking group interaction and this also risks missing the discursive depth possible from face-to-face focus groups. The nominal group technique utilises a similar approach to initial data, but instead of the iterative rounds of qualitative analysis used in Delphi, uses a quantitative group ranking of the items identified (Stewart, Shadasani and Rook, 2007, pp.153-4) making the process more hierarchical, although a similar hierarchy can be identified in consensus technique. Nominal groups can be brought together, at which point they are likely to use a round robin sharing of views which is similar to the initial stage of the 'focussed

conversation' but this is not common, as the technique is aimed at reducing the impacts and conflicts possible through group interactions (Stewart, Shadasani and Rook, 2007, pp.153-4).

The data collected through the focus group was transcribed and analysed using the approaches discussed previously in this chapter. This initial analysis led to the development of the approach to the next data collection, the semi-structured interviews, discussed next.

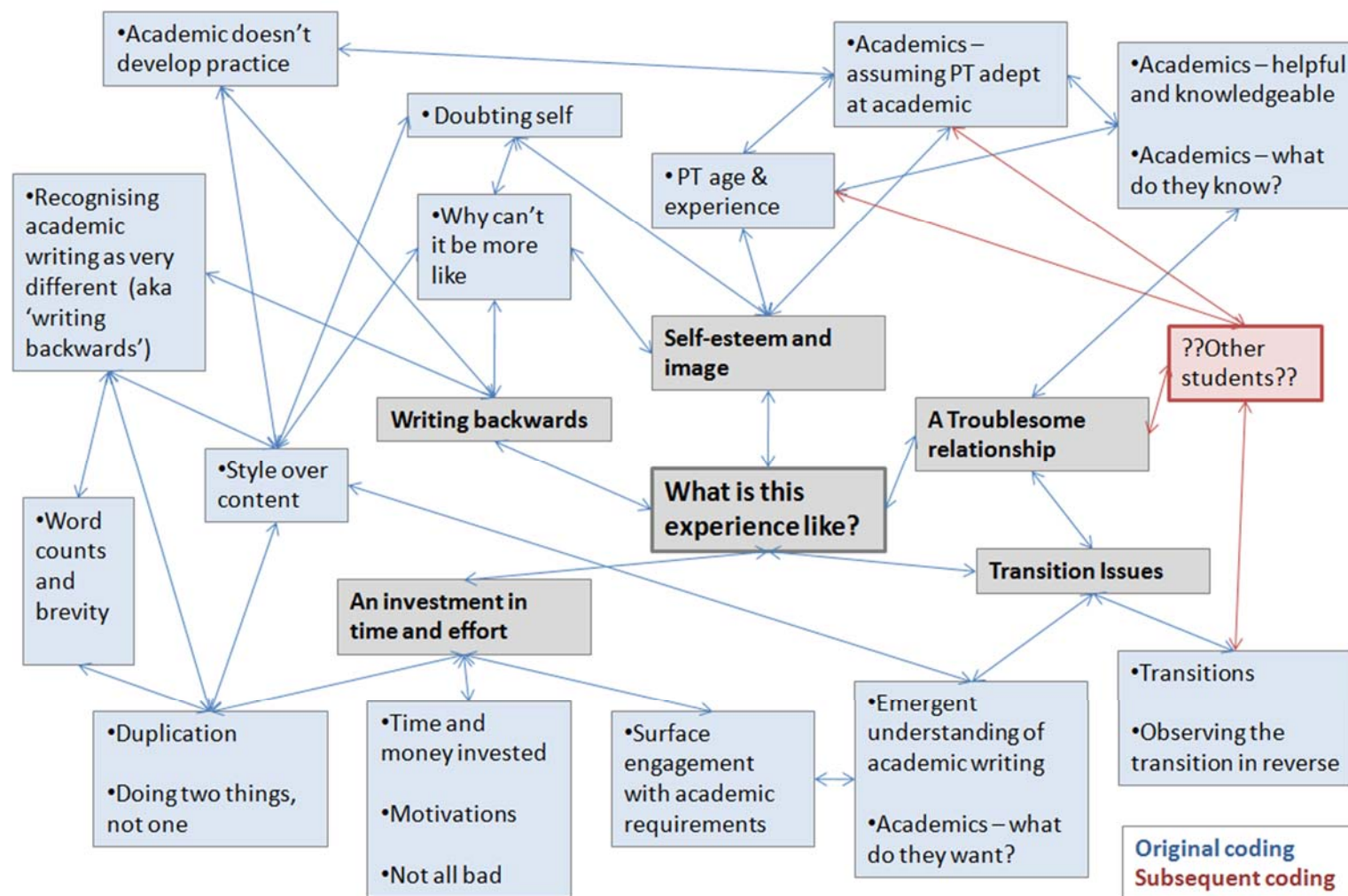


Figure 3.6: Initial Analysis of the Emergent Themes from the Focus Group Discussions

3.6 Interviewing as the ‘Exemplary Method’ Within IPA

IPA emphasises semi-structured interviewing as the ‘exemplary’ data collection method (Eatough and Smith, 2008, p.187; Smith and Osborn, 2008, p.57), and here it has provided the second, and main, data collection method. The development of an appropriate interview ‘schedule’, taking a logically structured approach to the topics at hand, reflecting sensitivities and supported with appropriate prompts, is encouraged (Smith and Osborn, 2008, pp.59-63). This section sets out the development of this schedule, how the interviews were carried out, and the issues surrounding semi-structured interviewing.

3.6.1 Interviews as a Constructed Reality

Interviews can be viewed as creation of meaning between the interviewer and interviewee, in which the animated subject of the interview ‘not only holds the facts and details of experience, but, in the very process of offering them up, constructively adds to, takes away from, and transforms them into artefacts of the occasion’ (Holstein and Gubrium, 2011, p.153). Participants construct their own presentation of their experiences and what they choose to include, to elaborate and to silence. Through this they are engaged in a construction of reality, and in turn a co-construction with the researcher. Interviewing therefore becomes an empathic process, wherein it ‘is not merely the neutral exchange of asking questions and getting answers. Two (or more) people are involved in the process and their exchanges lead to the creation of a collaborative effort’ in the creation of a ‘contextually bound and mutually created story’ (Fontana and Frey, 2008, p.116). This is echoed in Smith and Osborn’s description of interviewing as a collaborative process, as interviewees are able to steer the direction of the interview, and introduce previously unconsidered topics (2008, pp.58-64).

Given this constructed nature, interviews will necessarily be incomplete because they, ‘cannot be infinite in length, and all the more partial if it is not to be unbearably boring’ developed from ‘delimited segments of real-life persons’ lives’ in which we’ may get closer to people’s lived

experience' (Miller and Glassner, 2011, pp.134-6). This suggests that participants may engage in selective editing of experience to present aspects they feel are interesting, or which they feel the interviewer wishes to hear about, or those which are sensationalized, forming an interesting story about either the experiences or the teller. Given this constructed and incomplete nature of interviewing, objectivity becomes 'try[ing] to describe [the participant's subjective view] with depth and detail. In doing so, we try to represent [their] view fairly and to portray it as consistent with [their] meanings' (Charmaz, 1995, in Miller and Glassner, 2011, p.132). This reflects the politically bound nature of interviewing which 'refutes the whole tradition of the interview of gathering objective data to be used neutrally for scientific purposes' (Fontana and Frey, 2008, p.115). Interviews are co-constructions, subject to the environment in which they exist, and bound in political tensions and constraints.

3.6.2 Interviewing Within IPA

Semi-structured interviewing is led by the development of an appropriate interview schedule, taking a logically structured approach to the topics at hand, acknowledging sensitivities and supported with appropriate prompts (Smith and Osborn, 2008, p59-63). This is key in supporting the shift in power from the interviewer to the interviewee, with the interviewer's role being to 'facilitate and guide, rather than dictate exactly what will happen' (Smith and Osborn, 2008, p.63).

This empowered approach can be contrasted with Fontana and Frey's (2008, pp.116-7) suggestions that co-constructed interviewing offers 'a walking stick' 'to help people get to their feet', with the interviewer as 'advocate and partner'. Whilst offering a political view of interviewing, this feels one-sided, positioning the interviewee as powerless. This is the antithesis of the IPA view of the interviewee as empowered expert, in particular the necessity to recognise the participants' 'experiential expert[ise]' (Smith and Osbourn, 2008, p.59-63) in the interview schedule. In this research, the focus group provided one mechanism to support this, and Cousins (2009, p51-52) emphasises the role focus groups can play researching 'students' experiences of higher education

[and] the formulation of ...interview questions'. For example, the emphasis placed by the participants on the recognition of their expertise prompted the choice of opening question, which focussed on exploring how the qualification fitted into their career.

A standard schedule was developed (see Appendix 1), but was adapted for each of the participants in the focus group, following up on cues from that discussion. As mentioned earlier, the questions were piloted with a small group of HR practitioners who had been in the same position as the focus group. Further, Smith and Osborn suggest the use of funnelling (2008, p.62), to elicit more specific and detailed answers, and examples of this can be seen throughout the interview schedule.

3.6.3 Interviews as a Stage in This Research Project

The use of the multi-stage approach to flexible question design and funnelling were significant in the conduct of the interviews, as one interview seemed to differ greatly from what was expected based on the focus group discussion. This is a risk in multi-stage data collections, where differences between the stages can occur as 'one cannot expect answers on one occasion to replicate those on another, because they emerge from different circumstances of production' (Holstein and Gubrium, 2011, p.154). However, the flexible schedule and funnelling revealed that the participant's views had changed significantly, and this was instrumental in understanding their experiences.

Interviews took place between August and October 2014 with five participants taking part, four of whom had attended the focus group, and one further participant. Following the completion of the interviews, and transcription, attention moved to the analysis process, and the concurrent development of a series of case vignettes.

3.7 Case Studies, Their Use as a Heuristic, and Their Place in IPA

Case studies are not commonly used within IPA, despite the strong idiographic approach, which could be assumed to favour such individualised analysis. The use of them within this project is somewhat unusual, and it is this choice which is explored below.

3.7.1 Case Studies/Vignettes as an Analytical Process

Much of the analysis was undertaken using the thematic analysis process described earlier, but some was carried out through writing case vignettes to help interpret and engage with the individual experience of the participants. There is interest in the use of case studies, both individually and across wider cross-case analysis from a range of authors in IPA (for example, Eatough and Smith, 2008, p.192; Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.38), but it remains an uncommon presentational approach. However, case studies do feature frequently in phenomenology, as part of its wider contribution to the holistic view of case studies in research (Thomas, 2011, pp.45-59). Here they are used to provide a typifying account, where the reader is able to 'feel that she has vicariously experienced the phenomenon under study' (Starks and Trinidad, 2007, p.1376). Given the particularly idiographic nature of IPA and its inherent emphasis on the individual, case vignettes of each of the participants felt appropriate and respectful. They are snapshots of one time and place, and engage the reader with the lived experience at the individual level.

In developing the case vignettes, the hermeneutic of IPA was significant, offering readers an opportunity to view the world through the participant and also 'through the researcher's eyes, and in the process, to see things we might not otherwise have seen' (Donmoyer, 2000, p.63). IPA may not normally utilise cases as whole narratives, instead focusing on the use of extracts, but this study foregrounds the original narratives in the individual case vignettes, in order to allow the reader to position themselves within the varied and convergent aspects of the lived experience, and to engage closely with the researchers 'intuitions, meaning discriminations and transformations' through 'as complete a track record of the process as is possible', as suggested by Giorgi and Giorgi (2008, p.49). Through this it is hoped that the reader will engage in the analysis hermeneutic, and gain richer insights into the experience.

3.7.2 The Case Vignette

The case vignettes were developed through multiple drafts, as an engagement with the data, and to create coherent and meaning representations. This use of 'writing and rewriting so that the researcher can distil meaning' is recognised as a common approach within phenomenology (Starks and Trinidad, 2007, p.1376), and is emphasised by Van Manen (1997). Similarly, much of the analytical process of IPA engages with writing and discursive analytical methods. The case vignette was intended to provide a summary and initial analysis for each participant, and they were asked to give feedback on it, offering an opportunity to reflect upon the discussion themes and topics, to add further thought or comment, and some confirmation of the initial analysis. This was used in later reflection and development of the data analysis to examine the subtext within the data, supporting reflection *on* and *in* the data, and separating out what is said from how it is told (Cousins, 2009, p.104). Further, inviting 'talk back', enabled participants to express a rejection of the interviewer's line of questioning, or construct of reality, through the dismissal of topics as irrelevant, and the correction of misunderstandings (Blumer, 1969, p.22 cited in Miller and Glassner, 2011, p.138). Talk-back enables the co-constructed reality of the interview to be closer to lived experience, and circumvents some of the researchers potential skewing of the participants 'truth'.

The case vignettes were shared with individual participants, as a first step in this respondent validation, between February and April 2015. Responses to this were limited, perhaps reflecting the participants' priorities, or the time elapsed since the research had taken place. Respondent validation may be of questionable benefit, as participants may be uninterested, or may have difficulty accepting accounts which are not congruent with their self-view, but often offer insight for subsequent analysis (Silvermann, 2014, citing Bloor, 1978, 1983 and Abrams 1984). However, it is clear from the responses that the vignettes, despite being asynchronous representations of both one-to-one and group discussions are cogent with the lived experiences as interpreted by the individuals, and as such can be viewed as offering significant validation of the analysis. Comments included;

'Looks good to me, you've covered all the key points very well'

'I think you covered everything and managed to accurately record my stream of thought'

'...you have captured our conversation very accurately and I'm happy with it as it stands'

(Email conversations with Brian, Grace and Cal, April 2015)

Subsequently, these versions were redrafted into a more succinct presentational format. These versions form a 'set of individual case studies' (Robson, 2011, p.138), in 'parallel and multiple' (Thomas, 2011, p.95), felt to highlight the differences and similarities therein. Classifications of case studies like this exist, and whilst these are not necessarily 'exemplifying cases' (Bryman, 2012, p.70, citing Yin, 2009) the nuances of the individual experiences have elements of the 'outlier case' (Thomas, 2011, p.77), and perhaps enable some indication of the broader spread of experiences that may occur.

The case vignettes are presented in both abridged form in the Analysing and Interpreting the Experience, and in greater detail in Appendix 3: Extended Case Vignettes. The extended vignettes are presented without significant analysis, other than that which is engaged in trying to 'building an alternative coherent narrative from the messy sense-making of the participant' (Eatough and Smith, 2008, pp.189-90). The analysis of the cases is contained instead in Chapter 4, in which the analysis is presented thematically. This echoes Larkin, Watts and Cliftons' (2006, p.104) two-fold description of the aims of IPA in firstly attempting to understand and describe the participants lived experience, (i.e. the case vignettes), then positioning this in wider social or theoretical context (the subsequent analysis). This overall approach is similar to that suggested by Yin (2014, pp.56-63) whereby participant accounts are developed and analysed individually, with an individual 'case report' created, but in which the analysis is developed across the cases.

It is hoped that the case vignettes provide a deeper and richer engagement with the experiences of the participants than might be achieved through the traditional presentational approach of IPA, and

that doing so enables the reader to sit alongside the analysis process, rather than be detached from it. The aim has been to cut through some of the noise that exists in multiple hermeneutic analysis, and strengthen the relationship between the reader and participant.

3.8 Conclusion

In summary, this study has approached an engagement with this cohort of practitioner-students by seeking to deeply understand the particular features of each individual experience. It has utilised a phenomenological focus paying specific attention to the individual and interpretative nature of this, through the use of IPA and its 'combination of phenomenological and hermeneutic insights' (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.37). In doing so however it has drawn upon techniques and presentational aspects which are perhaps atypical within IPA, but which has enabled rich data collection and analysis which is convergent with the participants own viewpoint, and, further, supports the reader's engagement with the analytical discussion which follows. Creative approaches are encouraged within IPA (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.80) and this study remains firmly situated here. The use of the consensus workshop technique to gain an initial sighting of the experiences via a focus group allowed the collection, and participant led analysis, of data. This led in turn to the development of the semi-structured interview schedule. Participant influence on the research was further supported by the sensitive and responsive style of interviewing utilised. Finally, the use of case vignettes, shared with the participants for feedback, albeit without detailed comment, engages the reader with the experience at a level which is closer than may be allowed through other presentational approaches.

Having established the theoretical framework in which this study sits, and the methodological approach taken to explore this, the study now moves to an engagement with the experience through the case setting and case vignettes, before moving to the analysis and discussion of the interpretation of these varied and engaging experiences.

4 Analysing and Interpreting the Experience

The aim in this chapter, and the accompanying case vignettes, is to offer a representative account, highlighting commonality and distinctiveness within the participants' experiences. The themes described here, were developed through the assembling of the case vignettes and initial emergent coding. The latter was collected under two levels of categorisation, theme and super-ordinate conceptual themes, and subsequently organised further to create conceptually consistent narrative overviews. These are shown overleaf in Figure 4.1: Conceptual Framework - Analysis Themes, demonstrating the link between the analysis themes and the conceptual frame first introduced in Chapter 1. Also shown overleaf is an abbreviated version of the full list of the emergent codes which can also be found in Appendix 2: Emergent coding related to analysis themes.

However, these conceptually grouped themes are not independent, as the interactions between these are key, evidenced both in the participant's accounts, but also the frequency of repetition and duplication between the coding and the themes. Therefore, to locate these themes, the chapter begins with brief case vignettes, followed by each theme explored in detail. The complexity of representing individual experience within an overarching discussion can lead to the individual account being lost, thereby risking both homogeneity and a lack of nuance. To address this, full case vignettes of each participant can be found in Appendix 3: Extended Case Vignettes, in addition to the following brief introductory accounts. Furthermore, this chapter incorporates quotations taken from the interviews and focus group discussions, tagged to participant and time, enabling transparency, and foregrounding the individual experience. This discussion is followed by an exploration of how the themes interact, embodied in the experience of each participant. The chapter closes with a reflection on the extant literature and a final summary.

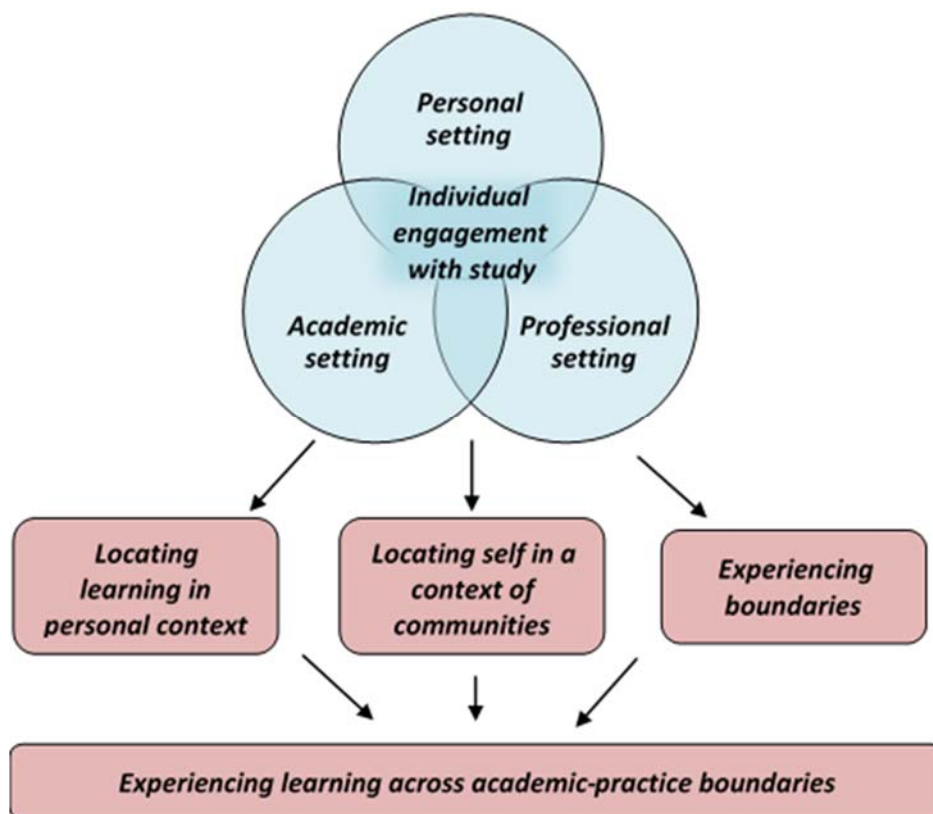


Figure 4.1: Conceptual Framework - Analysis Themes

Super-ordinate Themes	Theme
Locating study in personal context	Studying mid-carer
	Locating self as experienced
	Locating self as HRM practitioner, or not
	Locating self as a student
	Implications of mid-career study
	Relevance of mid-career study
Locating self in a landscape of practice and constellation of communities	HRM practitioners / Other managers
	Student Community - Practitioner Students
	Student community – Wider student community
	Academic community
Experiencing academic and practice boundaries	Experiencing liminal identity positions
	Observing difference
	Dealing with difference

Table 4.1: Analysis by Theme

4.1 Case Vignettes

The brief vignettes below are intended to offer an initial insight into the participants' lives. A detailed account of vignettes as an analytical tool, and expanded vignettes of each participant, can be found in Chapter 3 - Methodology and Appendix 3: Extended Case Vignettes.

- Brian** Brian is in his late forties and has had an extensive career in engineering within one employer, which he combined with a range of trade union roles. After a restructuring programme he moved across to his employer's HRM team, and studied for a level 3 CIPD certificate before beginning the postgraduate course.
- Cal** In his mid-thirties, Cal is a Learning Development professional in another Northern University. Already holding an extensive range of professional L&D qualifications, a merger between his L&D team and the HRM team triggered his interest in studying a postgraduate HRM qualification to reflect his newly expanded role.
- Grace** An experienced line manager in a major service sector employer, Grace is in her late thirties. Grace's move into HRM was triggered by her becoming a mother, and her engagement with studying on the postgraduate programme was her first formal studies since her uncompleted undergraduate degree.
- Polly** Employed at the same organisation as Grace, Polly is in her early forties, and has been with this employer since her undergraduate humanities studies. Polly also moved into HRM after a period of maternity leave, after having been in line management roles to date, and had not engaged with study outside of on-the-job training since her undergraduate studies.
- Yvonne** Yvonne is a sales manager in her mid-forties. She took a year out to support her family business, triggered by her father's terminal illness, and studied alongside this, initially with the full-time programme, and then moving across to the part-time cohort. This is her first return to formal education since her undergraduate studies.

4.2 The Role of the Researcher in the Analysis

The researcher's role in IPA analysis is key. For whilst IPA is built upon the double hermeneutic of the participant telling their story and the researcher interpreting it, this is an embodied and socially situated account (Eatough and Smith, 2008, p180-181), therefore requiring insight into this nuanced personal experience. Similarly, the tensions between the Husserlian and Heideggarian aspects of IPA, concerning bracketing and informed interpretation, require the researcher to be 'like and unlike' the participants (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.37).

My own experiences, both as a practitioner-student previously, practitioner-academic currently, and located in the research setting, have enabled me to be both informed by, and aware of, the participants' experiences. They have also required an element of distancing from the analysis in order to retain both objectivity and to avoid assumptions of meaning. For example, Grace and Polly's experiences of the final assessment would have been difficult to understand without the detailed knowledge of the assessment structures developed through my role within University X. On the other hand, such knowledge could easily have influenced my view of the participants' experiences, given my loaded position as an employee of University X and the power imbalances this creates. Likewise, my location as a colleague of the academics which appear in the students' accounts required sensitivity in their handling.

Within IPA, the key to managing these tensions is through reflection and auditing in the analysis (Smith, Flower and Larkin, 2009; Larking and Thompson, 2012). This has been achieved through supervision, through reflection on the data with peers also working in this context or with practitioner-students, and through careful auditing of themes within the analysis. In summary therefore, while IPA places the researcher both within and alongside the participants' accounts, the analysis which follows attempts a balance between interpretation, understanding and informed scepticism.

4.3 Theme One - Locating Part-Time Postgraduate Study in a Wider Personal Context

The particular character of the participants' experiences is created by their location as part-time, postgraduate, practitioner-students. As such, the analysis begins with this location, to understand the motivations and impacts of this mode of study.

4.3.1 Why Locate Study Mid-career?

For the participants, study is located at transitions in often longstanding careers, with changes triggered by employer restructuring, life changes, but also from an intrinsic desire to move into HRM from personal interest. In addition, there was an expectation of a good fit between a career in HRM and the wider commitments in their lives.

"...coming back from having a baby, my priorities kind of changed a little bit, and I was looking for another role, if I'm brutally honest, that meant I didn't have to work weekends, and that was kind of a Monday to Friday sort of thing, standard hours... when I looked out there at the different types of roles available, HR was definitely something that I was interested in learning more about... so when the job came up it was ideal. It was kind of what I was looking for in terms of the practicalities of what I needed, but it was also something that I was interested in." (Grace, 4min)

These mid-career shifts into HRM made recognition of their existing skills and competence via the CIPD qualification significant both within their employment contexts and the wider HRM community. The impact of this can be seen in Polly's transition from initial interest in HRM, through qualification to resultant promotion.

"I did some research and thought... I probably need to do an HR qualification, because it is notoriously difficult to get into HR in this organisation, unless you've got any kind of previous background." (5min)

"...you need to have that kind of qualification to be recognised... to say 'yes, I'm CIPD qualified... at a particular level'... it was almost a kind of 'must do' to be in that HR world... without doing that... you wouldn't necessarily be recognised... I've got this management experience but here's my HR experience... it's given me a bit of currency to get this new role" (31min)

Whilst the CIPD qualification is important, equally significant seems to be a desire to validate and locate their knowledge and experience in the new context of an HRM environment, particularly

where entry to HRM is at a senior level. However, the relevance of the CIPD recognition remains, as shown by Grace, whose move into HRM management occurred within her current employer.

“...the qualification won’t necessarily make a massive amount of difference as far as my career progression... because I’m already in quite a senior position... I simply wanted to learn more. I’d only been in HR for a couple of years, and in a position of reasonable seniority, and I wanted to have as much knowledge as the people who were my direct reports, if not more, so that was my motivation for doing it...” (3min)

What emerges is a picture of study as a key feature of career transition, and as such, a place of uncertainty, with previous experience being relocated in the context of a new community. In this study acts both as a lever to recognition and validation of experience in the HRM practice community within current and possible future employment, but also internally, in terms of validation of experience to their colleagues, many of whom may well be better qualified or more experienced within HRM, and as such could be seen to challenge the validity of their new career position. This is a position of significant vulnerability, the implications of which become clear in their experiences.

4.3.2 Locating Self as Experienced

Given this vulnerability, it is unsurprising that study within career change had significant impact on participants’ view of themselves as experienced and competent practitioners. Particular emphasis was made to the extent of their experience;

“...what I do is fifteen years’ worth of experience that has kind of been built up” (Grace, 16min)

“I have been a manager since, crikey, for about fourteen years, so there isn’t a management course I’ve not been on...” (Polly, 25min)

Brian in particular emphasised identity through experience, locating his new role in HRM within his long experience outside of this.

“I generally refer to it as poacher turned gatekeeper... I’ve been in industry all my life ... for about thirty-two years with the same company... I started off, I’m a high voltage engineer, and then I got involved heavily in the trade union side... for twenty years I was shop steward at this site... when they started to close I got even more heavily involved, even down to visiting parliament five times... to try to overturn the decision. So as it was progressing, we

knew it was going to happen I decided to move, to have a total change of career, and move into the HR side" (1min)

For Yvonne, her depth of experience served to highlight the differences between her and the full-time cohort, a theme explored in more depth later, but indicative of how she views herself;

"...I said I had just come from sort of 20 years out in industry and everybody just looked at me" (50min)

Even Cal, as the youngest, and therefore possibly the least experienced practitioner, used his length of experience to locate studying against a background of experience, supported with his existing qualifications, perhaps suggesting he feels his experience is insufficient on its own;

"...so I've probably been doing that for about seven years now, and I've got a number of kind of professional qualifications... I'd also completed a CIPD Leadership and Management postgraduate certificate a couple of years ago." (1min)

Clearly therefore, much of the identity of each participant is bound up in extensive and significant experience. As such, the lack of recognition of this by academic staff appears to have been troubling, in particular for Polly;

"It just feels that it's a one size that fits all, and everybody knows... who signed up for this course, what their experience levels are, so I don't think its tailored, and again that's very frustrating." (focus group, 19min)

"I think that distinction with people with experience that people have in the business world probably wasn't really brought to life." (9min)

However, not all the students felt this frustration, and Brian in particular seems to have found informal ways of using, and reinforcing, his practice experience;

"...they knew you worked in HR... but they weren't too sure exactly what your experience was or whatever. The experience part seemed to be when... with your lecturer... you start to have the chats, and you say look, I've done this or I've done that, and they find out a bit more about you." (Brian, 12min)

This significance of the depth and length of practice experience was apparent from the first data collection, and, to an extent, led the development of the interview schedule. This was framed

around an initial conversation about the students' experience, to offer a 'warm-up' to the interview, while acknowledging to participants that their experience was recognised and their locations as practitioners were understood. The approach was successful, which perhaps indicates the importance of this recognition, and the benefits which can be accrued by reflecting on this experience in the university setting. However, as will be seen, this is not always the case.

These sideways moves between management and HRM are liminal, on boundaries between practice communities, and clearly complex transitions to manage. Brian's use of the term 'poacher turned gatekeeper' offers insight into his complex experiences, stepping across from a location where he could be seen in opposition to HRM to acting from inside. While this might be expected to be very difficult, he appears to make the transition with relative ease. Meanwhile for Polly and Grace, and to some extent Yvonne, the emphasis placed on their management experience, validating their competence and authority, is significant. Finally, Cal's reinforcement of his own experience with a range of CIPD qualifications appears to be an attempt to compensate for his comparatively shorter career. What can also be seen in this location of themselves as experienced and skilled is the value they place on this and their frustration when this was not recognised or accommodated. The impact of frustration on their wider experience will be explored later.

4.3.3 Locating Self as an HRM Practitioner, or Not

Whilst seeing themselves as experienced, participants also recognised that they lacked some of the knowledge and experience appropriate to their responsibilities in their new HRM careers.

"I started the role, quickly identified that most of the people that I managed had Masters in HR or equivalent, and it was then that the Director said that he would sponsor me... so that the qualifications I had reflected the people that I managed..." (Grace, 7min)

Grace also expected study to fill this experience gap on a very practical level and was disappointed when this was not fulfilled, and so expressed uncertainty about the academic content in which she studied.

“...you expect to learn about HR issues, but it is more about management and leadership style and maybe that was my naivety about HR and what overall HR stands for... maybe it was me having different expectations and thinking that HR was going to be more about the types of HR issues that we cover. You know like learning about maternity benefits... that wasn’t part of it at all, and I just expected that that’s what it would be.” (40min)

Given the context of study as a lever or consolidation of career changes into HRM roles, it is not surprising that when attempting to define themselves as HRM practitioners, the CIPD badge is significant.

“...it would be quite useful... a certificate to say that this is the level that I am operating at.” (Cal, 2min)

Indeed, when discussing their experience, they frame this in terms of HRM, trying to twist the activity to be a closer fit.

“...as a centre manager you already deal with HR issues... we deal with our own discipline, we deal with our own performance, and we do it with support from the team that I now work for. So, I kind of, I had sort of had some HR experience, as a centre manager.” (Grace, 3min)

These comments reveal more about the uncertain positions the participants hold in their employment, for despite their extensive experience as managers, both Grace and Cal clearly feel that they need to know more about HRM in order to legitimise their membership of the community. For Cal, some of this may arise from the uneasy alignment that exists between HRM and his own background in HRD, while for Grace, her concerns about the curriculum she experienced and the content she felt she wanted to study are suggestive, as are her attempts to validate her new career role. In all cases, the participants are using studying to confer legitimacy and authority onto their membership of the community.

4.3.4 Locating Self as a Student

These strongly held views of themselves as practitioners, and their work to relocate this expertise into their new professional settings partly explains why Brian, Polly and Grace, do not identify as students at all, but instead as practitioners who happen to studying, even to the point of using studying as a joke;

"I don't see myself as a student [laughs]. Isn't that an awful thing to say... it wouldn't cross my mind to think of myself as a student, I might say flippantly to people 'yeah, yeah, I'm off to school', but I wouldn't actually think like that." (Polly, 34min)

However, for Yvonne such a distance from the student community was problematic given her temporary full-time studies, which created a dissonance between herself as a student and who she understood herself to be more widely;

"Initially I think I probably did [feel different to the full-time students], not in any superior kind of way, actually probably the opposite... I read an article on imposter syndrome, about fearing that you didn't merit being there and things like that and I identified so much with it that I thought my God why am I here... when I started getting into it and we started talking about things it started to click and I didn't feel any different." (Yvonne, 50min)

Meanwhile Cal's employment in higher education enables a comfortable duality as practitioner and student, particularly where he has been able to draw on his student experience in his work;

"...we'd often have conversations around what I was using at university, because in that scenario I was actually the student... I guess I was able to have them discussions, being a student and a practitioner." (Cal, 15min)

Some participants view themselves as outside the student community, with Polly, Grace and Brian holding provisional and temporary engagements tolerated for the sake of qualification, while Yvonne and Cal, who have formed stronger bonds with academic staff, have deeper, if not complete alignments. In all cases, while the boundary between their previous career paths and their new HRM roles appear deliberately blended to enable the relocation of their experience into the new community, this is much less apparent across the practitioner/student divide. Even Yvonne, whose full-time studies would be expected to challenge this, initially feels outside of the student body, creating a crisis of identity, something which changes over time. The other participants feel distant from the student community; they do not see themselves as part of it, and therefore the experience is both liminal and peripheral to who they are and what they do. Indeed, the sense that study is something which they fit in around their employment, that they do on the odd day, reinforces peripherality, despite the potential significance of the qualification to gaining recognised and central positions in the HRM communities. This in some way explains the experiences that follow.

4.3.5 The Implications and Costs of Locating Study Mid-Career

For the participants, the costs of simultaneous engagement in study and employment, financially, professionally and personally, and the implications of this for their loyalties and commitments are significant. This was apparent from the focus group, despite an encouragement to discuss issues other than work/life balance, and was expanded in the interviews, emphasising commitment to employers alongside family and friends. What emerges is a complex set of interconnections between finance and time which can be seen in those receiving employer funding but also in Yvonne's self-funded study, which created significant pressure to succeed, and thereby justify the investment;

"I was buying a house before I did this and I pulled out the day that I got accepted onto the course, it was one or the other. I could have had a lovely great big house, the money that I've spent coming to university...." (Yvonne, 75min)

"I had to be fully committed to it, because I was funding it myself, the only thing I was going to see going down was my savings, if I didn't have a masters to come out at the end of it then it was of no benefit." (Yvonne, 3min)

This is no less acutely felt by those receiving employer support, creating a sense of obligation to succeed in study, despite the implications of time, both for employment and personal life;

"...it's important to get my work-work done, but equally I was conscious that because I was getting supported by [my employer] to do my studies, to give it that best of that as well. So it was a bit of a balancing act really..." (Cal, 12min)

"...the fact that the company was sponsoring me I think put even more weight to think crikey I've really got to... pull it out of the bag now, because the company has invested this money in me." (Polly, 40min)

However, the time impacts of studying go beyond the level of commitment employers appear to be willing to support and there is an explicit expectation that students will manage the shortfall in their personal time, in addition to expectations of working outside of normal hours. This was immediately apparent in the focus group consensus;

'Time hungry' cluster; Taken up too much precious time (Grace), Family Support – the support and family time lost, due to course work (Brian), Tired – time constraints with life and study (Yvonne)

This expectation created clashes with commitments outside of work. For example, whilst Grace's employer funded her, and gave her time off, they expected her to manage her studies in her own time, and this quickly began to cut into her family life, undermining the anticipated improvements in work/life balance from her career move;

"...It was really difficult... the amount of extra work, then it was a lot harder than I anticipated it was going to be... the weekend is purely for family time, but that has had to change... I just physically didn't have any more time to squeeze out the university work, so that has had to be done on weekends." (10min)

Likewise, Cal felt acutely that studying, employment in his new role, and issues in his personal life, created clashing time commitments which he negotiated by creating delineations;

"...I had a lot going on at home, and I think getting the balance between work, study and life in general was quite a challenge in that time... equally my focus was to try and get through everything that was going on but also the importance of completing my studies." (11min)

"...I wanted to make sure I had separate time for it, so that I could, I suppose, switch my mind-set from focusing on the work stuff and focus on the study stuff." (6min)

While such demands could be expected to trigger a withdrawal from study, the investment in and commitment to study overrode this, regardless of how demanding negotiating these balances became, as Polly articulates;

"I thought I knew what the amount of work would be, but it's just trying to balance your life, your family, this... there's no point in putting all this time and money into this, for it not to get the right outcome." (focus group, 14min)

"...the time is just tremendous and that was a real juggling act, trying to fit in that work, being a mum... a friend, a wife, a daughter... I literally found the last six months' pure hell." (27min)

While this sacrifice has costs within the family, Brian is also clear that they necessitate significant support from employers;

“...you have to have the company behind it to support [but also] obviously family members... a lot of nights I’ve lost, a lot of weekends I’ve lost, you know, with the family and that type of thing. So you’ve got to have commitment and you’ve got to have support not just from the company but also from your family as well.” (Brian, 53min)

However, this support is not always complete, and for Yvonne, her father’s ambivalence about her return to study created a further challenge of managing emotional impact, despite a strong sense of support from other family members;

“...for whatever reason my dad had supported me all my life, [but] I didn’t ever feel that he fully supported this move... I need to prove him wrong... I have to do it, ‘cause someone who meant so much doubted me... I kind of replaced those emotions with different ones... that actually I did do the right thing, and to pay my mum and my fiancé back for their complete and utter support throughout the entire thing.” (Yvonne, 25min)

It is clear therefore that concurrent employment and study necessitates complex balances, both in terms of the time required to study, but also in the cost to personal life. Employer funding creates a sense of obligation, both towards the job role in which they are establishing themselves, but also towards studying, with a sense that they must succeed to justify this support. These emotional and financial commitments, whether using employer or personal funds, create a sense of guilt, which is uneasily balanced against the time required for study, and wider commitments, such as family.

Indeed, the potential guilt created by the possibility of ‘wasting’ this family investment should studying prove unsuccessful, may well be more powerful than fearing failing employers. As such, the location of study alongside mid-career professional locations, and complex family lives, creates a pressured and demanding set of checks and balances which must be negotiated, and a setting for study which influences all other aspects of the experience, having significant implications for how these students engage with, and approach, learning.

4.3.6 Relevance of Studying Mid-Career

The significance of studying mid-career becomes apparent when looking at practitioner experience in relation to studying. For all of the participants, being mid-career provided an experience base on which to build their studies, and vice versa. For example, Grace feels that it would be hard to

complete studying without practice experience, and reflects on the subliminal influence of studying on her professional practice;

"...there are some assignments that I really don't know how the full-time students would have been able to do them without any practical knowledge." (34 min)

"I wouldn't say it would make me change every single part of the way I do my role on a daily basis but I think little things that I've picked up at university made me stop and think about the way I do things and how that affects the people around me." (17min)

This application of academic theory to the everyday practice of HRM is often cited as helpful, particularly in raising confidence in these new career locations;

"...one of the modules was around leadership development, and one of the pieces of my [work] portfolio [is] to lead on the leadership programmes that we run... So having looked at that in great depth of detail... has really helped me when we've been planning and designing them programmes." (Cal, 14min)

"I feel a lot more confident to talk about HR related issues... I think it gave me a lot more context to the theory behind it." (Polly, 13min)

However, their current practitioner experience was also used to reflect on the university content negatively in terms of how relevant, or nuanced, it is in relation to practice settings;

"...if we're developing new professionals, surely we should be giving them what industry is asking for, not what the university is looking for, when we go out to the outside world." (Brian, focus group, 12min)

"...the things that we study at university I agree with the principles behind it, you know, and I kind of agree that in a perfect world that is all great but when you are kind of faced with certain situations and you are faced with things in a practical sense it's not always as simple and straightforward as it tends to be when you are looking the theory behind it." (Grace, 15min)

Indeed, despite recognition of the influence of studying on their own practice, students articulated a sense of keeping the academic study of HRM separate;

"...I would like a lot more of where I could join the two together. For the most part I do keep the academic and the work separate." (Yvonne, 75min)

"I think I initially went into it with the intention of using everything I learned at university at work. But it quickly became clear that the types of things that were being covered at university weren't really going to help me in a practical environment." (Grace, 40min)

Perhaps this nuanced location of the increased knowledge base filtering into practice is best articulated by Brian.

"...if I was looking at a case, I wouldn't go looking for the literature behind what I was doing... that would never happen, for a start I haven't got the time to do that... But, I don't know, I suppose what happens [is] the underpinning behind, it gives you more, I won't say confidence, it's a strange one." (Brian, 41min)

These interrelationships are complex, reflected in Cal's conflicting accounts of how his study both reflected his practice, while also observing the lack of concurrency;

"I don't know whether it's just by planning, coincidence... the stuff I studied sort of reflected at the time whatever I was working on at work... it helped tie in things..." (21min)

"Sometimes it was difficult to find relationships... I thought as well, 'how does this relate today?' Sometimes it didn't..." (8min)

As such, concurrency of work and study may be beneficial, particularly in offering some measures that address the significant work/life imbalances they experience and the pressures which affect their approaches to studying.

"I thought no point [in] trying to do something new on top of something I am probably going to get in the day job anyway, so that was pretty good. But then I think, the flip side of that is trying to combine that massive piece of work and the amount of reading associated to it and get it academically right, would probably be the most difficult thing I've done across the course." (Polly, 27min)

Some of this balance may be driven by questions around the relevance and validity of studying, locating the qualification as validation, rather than a base on which to build a career.

"...when you move into the real world, the working world of HR, the academic side as such, as long as you've got the qualifications, the academic side is forgot about." (Brian, 9min)

These explorations of the relevance of studying mid-career offer insight into the complex relationships between work and study. These reflect not only the issues around the conceptual

body of knowledge within HRM but also the desire of both HRM and management students for content which relates to practice. Where these practices and knowledge align the participants appear to have found reassurance of the validity of the transfer of previous practitioner experience into the new practice community. There are aspects of concurrency and influence but also observations about a lack of nuance and appropriateness to practice settings. As such, these observations may offer a first sight of the communities of practice around academic/practice settings, and the boundaries between these, clearly seen in Grace's observations of the impact of studying on her professional practice. Also significant in boundary locations is the transition of knowledge and competence. This is emphasised in the observations made of the lack of applicability of knowledge gained from study. Consequently, the participants find the boundaries less permeable than they expected.

4.3.7 Theme One - Summary

For these participants, engagement with study occurs at career transitions, when personal expertise is being located into differing settings, as part of their acceptance into HRM communities.

Qualification and study allows a verification and validation of this, but comes at costs in terms of personal life, employment and beyond. Therefore, while a move to an HRM career may be seen as offering a better work/life balance, the complexity of managing multiple commitments affects this, and becomes the dominant feature of the participants' experience. This is also heavily affected by the sense of obligation placed on students by employer funding, which drives an emphasis on successful engagement with study, but contrasts with the pressures they face in fitting these demands into the time and space they have available. These pressures are set against the transference possible between communities, seemingly an infrequent and unusual occurrence.

While welcomed, at least in part for the benefits it offers in negotiating complex settings, there is a clear desire for an increased level of this. This alignment, or lack of, between their university and employment settings is a key feature of their experience, and is further explored in the sections which follow.

4.4 Theme Two – Locating Self in Landscapes of Practice and Constellations of Communities

While the initial plan for the study did not heavily feature the interactions of the participants with others, it became clear from the focus group that this required exploration. This was reflected in the subsequent interview schedule, where these issues frequently appeared. This discussion begins with their views of other practitioners, moves to their views of students, both practitioner-students and pre-experience full-time students, and then to their views of the academic staff with whom they engage.

4.4.1 HRM Practitioners/Other Managers

The context of these participants as new entrants to HRM communities, but established practitioners in their own disciplines, and as individuals engaged with study, appears to transpose into their views of the practitioners around them. For example, Yvonne differentiates between practitioners who have engaged in study, and those who have not, or at least not recently. However, it seems that this valuing of academic knowledge of HRM is not more widely experienced within the practitioner community, as the participants did not seem to feel that this was important or appreciated more widely in their practice community;

“[I only use theory] when I am working with the consultants because they are the only ones who get what they are actually about. [Others] don’t get what I have done, especially those who have never been through full formal education, so I don’t think it would enter their heads that some of those kinds of things might actually be useful.” (Yvonne, 33min)

In this, a practitioner perceived as a successful student is viewed as particularly skilled and used as a helpful resource in negotiating study and academic transference.

“...my best friend came and sat with me because she recently studied and she walked me through it... she became my sounding board.” (Yvonne, 45min)

A similar differentiation exists between practitioners seen as experienced within HRM, and those with operation experience, with a suggestion that the combination of both is unusual.

“...the people who are in HR don’t have operational experience and the operational people don’t have the HR qualification.” (Polly, 5min)

This emphasis on experience, and the locations of experience, is reinforced by the views of new graduate entrants to the profession, where it seems clear that study alone is not felt to be sufficient to be a successful practitioner;

“...and that’s a real culture shock for people, especially when we take new grads in.” (Polly, focus group, 13min)

“... I think the biggest contrast to them, having done the full-time route, with all the guys who’ve just come through from undergrad, is they haven’t got a clue what it means to add people to the mix.” (Yvonne, focus group, 13min)

What emerges is experience as a key differentiator in this community, with the type and depth of experience marking out a hierarchical order. New inexperienced entrants sit below practitioners experienced in either management or HRM, and therefore, practitioners experienced in both are more highly regarded. Given this, management and HRM experience defines the participants, something which can be viewed as self-preferential, perhaps to reinforce their own, new, identities and negotiating the uncertainty they are experiencing. Also differentiated are those practitioners with an academic understanding, as seen in Yvonne’s comments, but also present in Cal’s experiences. Again this suggests a reinforcement of themselves and their studies, unsurprisingly given the significant investment and effort involved in undertaking the qualification. In their views of other practitioners, the participants can be seen to be locating their experience straddling the boundaries between HRM and management. Also clearly seen are the locations of those with less experience as novices, on the edge of the community. The preference for this combination of academic engagement and wider experience may well be a way to reframe other practitioners as out-groups (Spears, 2011), but it also serves to reinforce their own choices and efforts as relevant and valuable. These insights into participants’ views enable us to see the practitioner community from their perspective, but also gain insight into their views of the student community, and it is to this I now turn.

4.4.2 Students

As is clear, the participants do not view themselves as students, setting themselves apart from the wider student community, creating a community of practitioners who just happen to be studying too. This creates two main strands to their interactions – their in-group of other practitioner-students, and an out-group of the full-time students alongside whom they were occasionally taught.

4.4.2.1 Other practitioner students

Relationships within the part-time practitioner-student community are both respectful and supportive, but also somewhat fragmented, consisting of smaller peer networks, as Grace explains;

“...for all there are only a few of us doing it part time, there was also little groups within that group. So there’s sort of two or three, four people we would regularly email each other... speak to each other after the lessons, we might share pieces of work that we had done, just to say this is how I have done it, so that was a definite help.” (14min)

These groups brought a broad range of experiences together, which was helpful, but again a differentiation of practitioners based on experience can be noted;

“I think that’s where the university was really beneficial... the different backgrounds and the different experiences that people had, and even having those, they were on the masters course, advisors who were just technically coming into HR, trying to develop their career, coming into, meeting people who had been in HR for a while or who had different backgrounds. I think that was probably... the main learning curve for everybody.” (Brian, 43min)

To some extent, these differing practitioner experiences appear to be significant learning resources.

When discussing this, participants often referred to other study participants, allowing insight into how they view each other. In this instance Polly refers initially to Brian, indicating how she had found his experience helpful. It is interesting to observe her adoption of his ‘poacher turned gatekeeper’ terminology.

“It has been really useful and there was a chap... with a massive amount of... union background and had been a union rep, now in HR, he had been all kinds of poacher turned gamekeeper, really interesting... a lot of different, some corporate, some public servants, a great mix of people... their HR experience brings a lot more to the table. You pick up the kind of practical stuff.” (38min)

In turn, Brian gained from a student with director level experience, alongside the wider range of experiences brought by other students.

"...we actually had an HR director who is there as well in the course. And we had obviously, from all levels of HR from advisory right up to the different levels, and when we had discussions it was good to see the different view." (43min)

Indeed, the experience of this more senior practitioner was also valued by Yvonne;

"... everybody round the table had work experience and [one student] who was next to me, he heads up the HR for [major employer], I mean what he knows about HR I'd love to know." (54min)

Meanwhile, Grace observes the lack of experience of some of the cohort with a cynical eye;

"There were probably three people who were kind of like me, they were already well established in their career... the rest of the group were quite... a bit younger than we were, just you know out of their degree, sort of mid-20s, and I think their view of things would often make me sort of think, yeah just let's wait and see [laughs]. And maybe that is me being jaded and maybe that's me being quite cynical having been there and done that, but when they are talking about certain ways of doing things and 'you know, I would rather do things this way and I would do things that way', I would just think, it is easy enough saying that now but once you are in the practical side of it, you automatically have to adapt to each situation." (28min)

Grace clearly views these less experienced students as lacking practical knowledge, and this reinforces the concept of hierarchically arranged views of practitioners. Indeed, it may be that this 'jaded' and 'cynical' view of less experienced students was picked up, as Polly observes that they were more reticent at contributing their views.

"...the different levels of experience and confidence... it has been frustrating and a couple of us, three of us in particular who probably speak more than others, nobody else will so, you know, if we don't speak up and start to lead a conversation others don't often contribute ... I suppose that's just, you know, people are more confident than others." (37min)

However, to an extent the benefit of this practitioner experience appears to have been to reciprocally provide both a resource for learning and a reinforcement of personal expertise, as Cal suggests;

"...a lot of the group were from an HR manager or HR Business Partner perspective, whereas I was the only one from learning and development.... I certainly valued their experience and what they brought and they were equally quite inquisitive about my involvement in learning development, how it would link in with HR in my institution." (36min)

This peer learning network is the aspect which Yvonne felt she missed in her initial full-time studies.

Here Yvonne is again articulating the idea of discussion, different communities and levels of experience being reflected in who speaks, and who does not.

"...only probably two or three of us out of that group having ever worked before, I was shocked. I was looking forward to sharing experience... I didn't get that opportunity to share experience because it was often people looking towards me, for that experience... if we were looking for examples, the whole room just turned to me." (16min)

This missing aspect was also apparent in the part-time cohort, with Grace expressing regrets about studying with less experienced practitioners, and wishing for more time with highly experienced peers.

"I think the Masters is very much positioned to people who have just completed their degree and are in their early 20s and rather than somebody older who has got a lot of work experience doing it. Had I known that at the beginning I might not have done it." (Grace, 30min)

In these examples two aspects of the student practitioner community can be observed. Firstly, peers in similar settings appear to offer significant support, as well as an opportunity to broaden their own practitioner experience, as seen when Cal acknowledges the significance of their differing specialisms, and of the benefits that sharing this brings. Yvonne felt that her initial experience lacked this important aspect. Secondly, an interesting hierarchy of students can be glimpsed, with those perceived as having greater experience to some extent looked up to, and in turn, lesser experienced students looked down on. In Polly's comments we can see she respects Brian's wider union expertise, Brian in turn acknowledges another student's senior role, and Grace dismisses the views of less experienced part-time students as ill-informed. This is an interesting insight into the dynamics of this student cohort, and is mirrored regarding their views of the full-time cohort.

4.4.2.2 Wider student community

Given their self-identification as 'not students', despite their engagement with study, they place themselves outside of the wider student community, perhaps in part due to the infrequent engagement between the part-time and full-time cohorts. Furthermore, the hierarchy of practitioner experience seen in the practice and practitioner-student communities adds to this sense of differentiation. With this in mind, how do these students view the wider group of postgraduate HRM students, given their out-grouping of themselves as not part of this community, and their significant emphasis on experience within the in-group of practitioner-students? One indicator is Brian's repeated mis-referral of this student cohort as undergraduates;

"I don't know how the undergraduates worked, I don't know how they take experience, or how they, just they go put the underpinning and whatever goes in the background." (46min)

"...as for the day-to-day, learning from the undergraduates, I wouldn't have thought not so much, I don't know if they picked anything up from us..." (48min)

"... if you do have a postgraduate course, would that the variety of knowledge bases as such, joining the two, or letting the undergraduates, getting the feeling of... what [HR] would be like." (49min)

In each of these cases he is referring to the full-time postgraduates alongside whom they have been taught. Whilst Brian's speech patterns are at times chaotic, this repeated use of the lower qualification to refer to academic peers indicates of a view of these students as 'lesser', lacking in experience to the detriment of their understanding.

Indeed, in the main, references to the full-time cohort are couched in recognition or concern about their lack of practice experience, either as a resource to utilise in the academic setting, or in transference to professional settings. Yvonne outlines her experience of working with inexperienced full-time students in a way which is very similar to Grace's observation of lesser experienced part-time students, including their amusement at the suggestions made in class. In both cases, the ability to locate HR theory into the complex reality of the workplace is foremost.

"...it was fascinating to see how some people use that information and thought it would translate into real life. Because they started throwing all sort so things in... I was struggling to sort of like maintain a level of professionalism...they were arguing for changing their terms and conditions over to zero-hour contracts, and how that would gain peoples respect and trust... I'm thinking, oh ok, fine, alright... we just kept on going with all of this and they kept coming back with weird and wonderful figures ... we were no closer to any sort of conclusion, because we were applying what we'd learnt on the outside, and they were looking at it from a student perspective without any understanding. And it was like, um, that's interesting [laughs]..." (20min)

This suggests that not only is this hierarchy of expertise used to locate themselves within their practice-based peers, but it is also directed towards full-time students. Combined with the sense of themselves as not part of this cohort, there seems to be significant out-grouping of full-time students from the part-time cohort. The impacts of this may perhaps be felt when the two cohorts are taught concurrently.

"...there were a couple of occasions where we had some full-time students [who] had finished their degree and gone straight on to their masters, and it was quickly really visible in terms of... their ability to actually understand and contextualize what does that really mean in the workplace. Whereas the advantage of having been working in industry, I was really able to link the two together." (Cal, 42min)

Indeed, this lack of an experience base is seen as a significant disadvantage;

"I think anybody who hadn't worked would have really struggled with that, so I would imagine the full-time students would have really struggled to do that." (Grace, 43min)

Whilst Yvonne notes that other full-time students looked to her to fill in the practice aspect, and Polly observes that less experienced part-time students hold back in front of more experienced ones, Grace and Brian, when taught alongside full-time students, appear to have held back, allowing less experienced students to express their views.

"...we're kind of all practitioners, we're all in a role, but the full-time students aren't... I would find myself having to kind of keep quiet almost, and sort of step back a little bit, because they would be talking very much from the aspect of someone who hadn't lived the role and were... kind of reading out of a book, more or less." (Grace, focus group, 10min)

"A lot of the times when you were with the mixed class, and there was a question ... Yeah, ok, we could answer ... because of the experience that we had, but it was, I think we were hanging ... back to let full-time students, to see what their opinion was. Because if we

answered the question... you wouldn't have got their opinion ... I know how I would have done it ... personally I was more interested to see how they would answer it." (Brian, 50min)

Furthermore, both Brian and Grace feel that these less experienced students gain from this exposure to practitioner-students.

"...the inexperience came through quite a lot with the full-time students, but again I think they put forward some very interesting ideas, but it was quite clear they had never had any practical knowledge... a lot of the time they wouldn't really say a great deal and I don't know if that was just down to the fact that they had, you know, people who had the kind of experience of doing that role and they might have been interested to hear what we had to say." (Grace, 32min)

"...that's what they need, to have a chat with someone out there working, as a, I'll not say mentor sort of thing... to tell them exactly that this is what will be happening in the outside world." (Brian, 20min)

Given the benefits attributed to a practice experience as a resource while studying, it is not surprising that lack of experience is emphasised. What is perhaps surprising is the sense of superiority which comes through in some accounts. In particular, Yvonne's struggling to maintain professionalism and Brian's suggestion of mentoring from part-time students, indicates a hierarchy with inexperienced, and therefore generally full-time, postgraduates at the bottom. Yvonne's experience, however, offers a contrast, as she recognises academic competency is significant, and realised this was actually a reciprocal exchange;

"...I would say [to full-time peers], 'but I don't get how you are supposed to write it down'. They're like, well it's easy, you need to do it like this, this and this. So I suppose we did get things from each other." (19min)

Indeed, the differentiation between the student cohorts is one which Yvonne doesn't seem to think is directed by younger full-time students towards older part-time ones.

"No one ever treated me any differently for the fact that I was older, or possibly if you looked at it on paper, slightly out of place to everybody else, in like, I hadn't come straight from undergrad, and gone into doing that and things. They didn't treat me any differently." (24min)

These views of the full-time student community on the same programme offer further insight into the experience. Despite studying towards the same qualification, there is a clear view of these

students as lesser, a view driven by a perceived primacy of practice experience. This results in full-time students being viewed with amusement, echoing the participants' views of lesser experienced practitioner-students. Also visible are issues around who engages with the discourse and why. Do full-time students hold back because they want to hear the experienced students speak, or vice versa? Yvonne perhaps offers nuance given her greater depth of engagement with the full-time cohort, recognising each group as differently skilled, and so having something to offer each other. What does seem clear however is that where the part-time and full-time students were taught together, reciprocal exchange did not necessarily occur. Having moved this exploration into the academic setting, the final community grouping to explore are the academic staff with which the students engaged.

4.4.3 Academic Staff

The locations and expressions of experience within academic settings are also very apparent in how the study participants view academic staff, especially the differentiation between staff perceived as having practitioner experience and those who do not. For practitioner-students, academic staff perceived as experienced practitioners, and able to embody this in their teaching, appear to have built effective and strong relationships with them.

"...that was a bit more reaffirming for me when I'm studying, that someone's from practice...I suppose I took it with a bit more caution... when someone was teaching me but equally he had put their hand up and said 'I've not worked in industry, you have, but I'll be able to provide you the academic theory and the background to it'... Well that's all good and well in theory, but have you used it in practice and are you able to demonstrate how it works." (Cal, 38min)

"...I probably identified a bit more with some than others, because some were very truly academic and some were leaning more towards the practitioner side... when you came in and you made that very up to date, very relevant to the outside world and all of that kind of thing. And [Lecturer A], because she's very much a practitioner, we'd do the theory but she's very engaging in how it fits in with real life." (Yvonne, 58mins)

In this Yvonne refers to a session I taught on the full-time programme, in which I used my practice experience as a case study. Indeed, for Yvonne, practitioner academics appear to have provided a paradigmatic trajectory (Wenger, 1998) from practice into a future academic career.

*"...that's the kind of thing I want to be able to teach them, I'd like to take them out of the lectures and take them into a practical group, and give them case studies, but real ones where you can show them the background to them and stuff like that. That would be me, that would be the kind of thing I would like to do, if I was in an academic environment."
(90min)*

This ambition was also shared by Cal, perhaps influenced by his employment within a university.

"I can envisage just the possibility that I might do something else in the future. Academically... I'd possibly like to get into lecturing." (Cal, 35min)

These possible future locations may influence their view of the academic staff they engage with, as both Yvonne and Cal seem more positive towards them than some of the other participants.

However, here they again give preference to practice experience, this time in relation to academic theory.

"... I think that being able to be a practitioner and teach it gives a deeper understanding to students of what works in reality. What they are actually going to be able to do with it, not a list of theories they are going to have to learn because someone is going to tick them off at the end. That they have actually got a real life value to it." (Yvonne, 32min)

Unfortunately, the currency of practice experience within the academic environment appears to have been short-lived, with Brian arguing such staffs' knowledge is out-of-date, and suggesting that they use the student experience to access current practice;

"...a lot of the times, even some of the lecturers were asking us questions, because obviously they had been out of the working world so long, as such." (12min)

"... the disjointing thing is, is obviously, your lecturers are all, are basically academic, they have been in the outside world but it was many moons ago, and things have progressed and changed." (16min)

"...I suppose even the lecturer, because of our backgrounds... and being current in what we are doing, they were getting the feeling of what it was still like in the outside world, and they could probably connect the literature... this point is still topic... this point isn't current anymore, we've moved on from there." (46min)

This view of staff as having out-of-date knowledge appears to have significance in terms of the respect afforded to staff, and of the relationships formed between staff and students;

"I have got a lot of respect for some of them... some of them are really switched on, really helpful, really able to give you what you need to finish it. But then I think others maybe don't have the tools themselves to be able to do it, they may be stuck in a bit of a rut themselves, in respect of maybe not up-to-date with a lot of the information." (Grace, 36min)

Similarly, an engagement with the study participants' experience in teaching was helpful, and in turn influenced how they perceive and engage with staff.

"I think there was a completely different approach [in the second year] about... how the experience at the kind of coal face could be kind of brought into the lectures, so it was less rigid around 'well I've got this lesson plan and this is the way I am going to deliver it' and I think people like [Lecturer A], [Lecturer B] would change things to be mindful of that and acknowledge it." (Polly, 20min)

Polly is again referring to the same practitioner academic as Yvonne has previously commented on.

Cal also found this helpful;

"...obviously I respect their experience in terms of the academic world, but they've been, I think, in terms for some of the lecturers, in particular they've said 'well, you work in the field', particularly in our part-time group, 'you work in industry, you've probably got a lot of experience that you could share with the group about things what happen in reality', in addition to the academic side of things." (37min)

More problematic for these students are those staff who are perceived as not having crossed the practice to academic gap at any point. So for Yvonne, not only is the ability to transfer practice experience into teaching important, but the ability to reverse this and translate theory into practice settings matters;

"...some of them are quite hung up on the fact that you must understand the theory more than you must understand how that theory works in practice... they just think you need to learn this theory and...this theory and... this theory. Yeah, but is it going to be any bloody good in practice... some people I just think are, they exist in this academic bubble and they're like writing textbooks but they don't work out in the real world so how can they write a textbook about how it works in the real world. That I struggle with, very much." (60min)

Given the dominance of practice experience in their views of both the HRM community and the student communities, whether full or part-time, it is unsurprising to find it again in their views of

academic staff. Staff able to locate themselves in the practice community, or able to draw practice experience into their teaching, are seen positively in comparison to staff viewed as 'purely academic'. This also appears to relate to the relationships formed between students and academics, and to the importance afforded to their views.

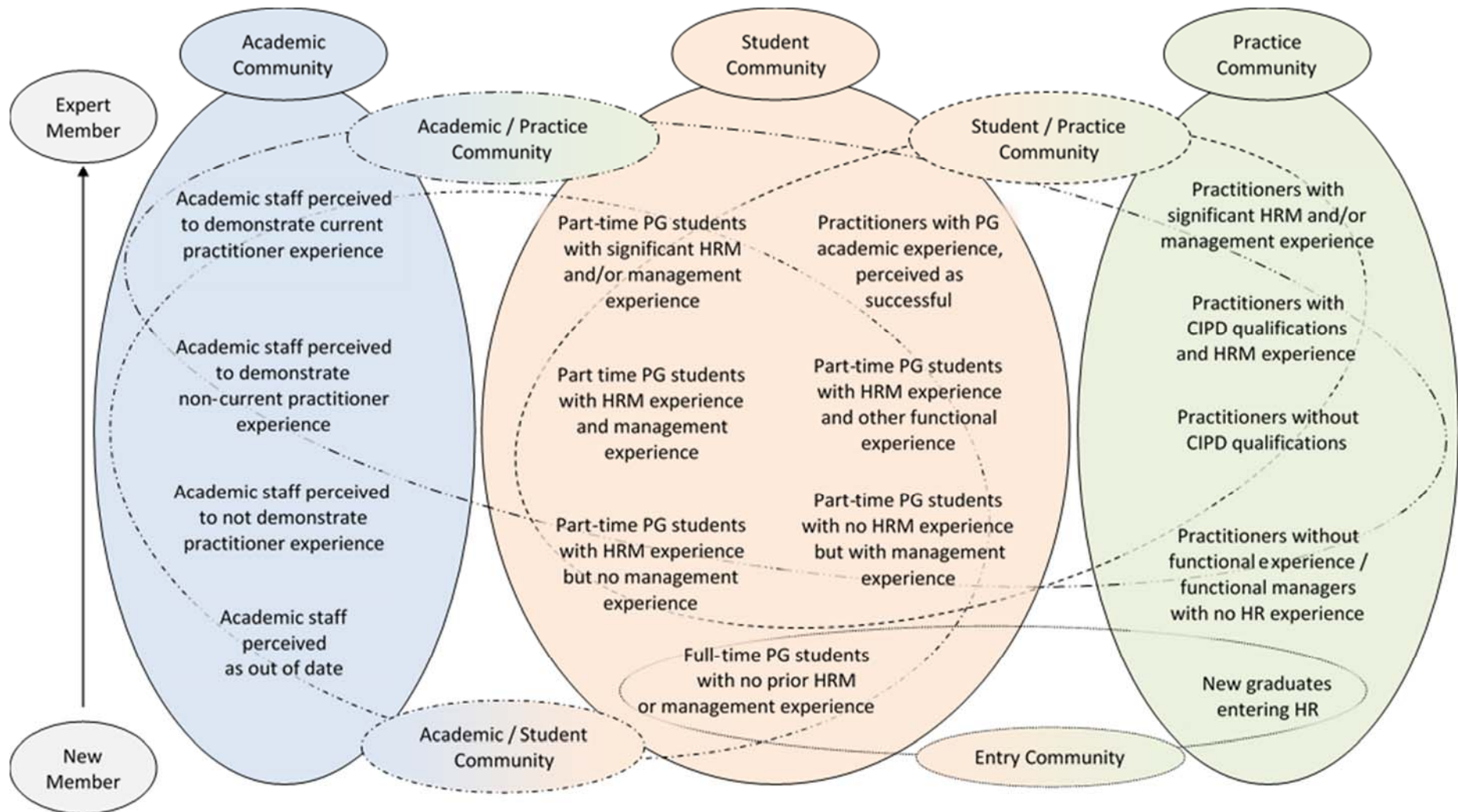
4.4.4 *Visualising the Observations of Others*

It is possible to map these communities and memberships conceptually, offering a clearer insight into how these groups are perceived by the participants, and how this perception has then been interpreted. This is in essence the double hermeneutic of IPA, of the retelling of experience and the interpretation of this retelling. Overleaf, Figure 4.2: Visualising the Observations of Others attempts to capture this illustrative viewpoint, conceptualising how communities intersect and relate.

What can be seen, moving right to left, are academic, student and practice communities, hierarchically arranged based on practice experience. These are shown in blue, orange and green respectively. Across these appear to flow further communities, which are indicated with broken line outlines, and shaded labelling showing the connections between the three main communities.

These include the new entrant community of recent graduates, whether in study or entering the workplace, who are seen as in deficit regarding experience, indicated with orange/green shaded labelling, reflecting the link between the two communities. There is also a poorly articulated academic to practice transfer community, embodied in those individuals seen to move between these positions, for example the practitioner successful at studying, or academics with a practice background, shown in blue/green shading. There is also a much clearer student to practice community, embodied in the participants themselves, and in others who have made the journey, and shown in orange/green. Finally, an academic to student community exists, seen both in the relationships between students and staff, but also in the future possible trajectories of the participants into academic roles, shown in blue/orange labelling.

Figure 4.2: Visualising the Observations of Others



4.4.5 Theme Two – Summary

This wider location of the differing communities can be illustrated by Cal's account of drawing new academic knowledge into practice settings. In this he highlights perceived distances between academic and practice communities, and between his own L&D community and the wider HR team in which he now sits;

"...one of the modules I was doing was employment law and employee relations... my background to that was limited but since I had... them modules delivered there was more of an insight, so when I was speaking to my colleagues I was able to... use that as a frame of reference... I guess talk about it in an academic way and say 'this is what the research suggests and this is... a good way of dealing with things', because again some of the staff that I was working with as part of the HRM [team], probably, hadn't really looked at academic texts for a long time... some of it was kind of a bit of intrigue, or 'where did you read that' or 'what was it about specifically', so again I could kind of point them in the right direction, some of it may be a bit of resistance almost... 'that's not how it works in practice'

[Did you convince colleagues otherwise?] I think that was the position they were going to adopt... there was one person where I was able to kind of convince him... but the others were 'we do it on a day to day basis and we kind of know best'.

[Do you think this comes from your background being in learning and development and not HRM?] Yeah, I think it could be, yeah." (17min)

Cal's experience suggests that while he finds the content of his study to be relevant and supportive of his employment, he meets resistance from his practice community, thereby reducing the impact of his qualifications, which are intended to confer legitimacy. Some of this lack of legitimacy and impact comes from his liminal location as an inexperienced HRM practitioner relocating from his previous community and some from the lack of interest and engagement with academic theory in the practice community, indicative of the gap between these discourses. Across the participants we can see that the significance of experience within practice communities, both HRM and management more generally, is paramount regardless of whether this is in viewing other practitioners, other students, or academic staff. In some part this may be a validation of their own career choices, reflecting their own management to HRM moves, and helping to justify the transition of their management experience into HRM settings, while also justifying their commitment and

sacrifice to study. What is also apparent however is that these students are constantly negotiating between defined communities, and aligning themselves to these communities and their members in multiple ways.

4.5 Theme Three – Experiencing Academic and Practice Boundaries

This interpretation of alignments to study and practice suggest that, while they cross the academic practitioner boundary on an ongoing basis over the duration of their studies, they are more deeply immersed in the practice setting, holding quite peripheral alignments to academic work, and experiencing the transitions quite acutely.

4.5.1 Impacts of the Liminality of Study on Personal Identity

The complex locations of themselves, as experienced line managers, as less experienced HRM practitioners, and as stood apart from the student community, create an experience of contrasting contexts at a personal and emotional level. This was clear from the focus group discussions, where it was foregrounded by two of the clusters in the focus group consensus;

‘Negative emotional response to work versus university’ cluster; Feeling shocked at differences between academic world and practical (Grace), Frustration between practical and academic (Yvonne)

Personal emotional effect’ cluster; Fear – Can’t do this (Yvonne), Led to feelings of disengagement (Polly), Caused frustration (Grace)

The focus group also brought into view the experiences of discourse and engagement with academic writing requirements.

“Feeling like you shouldn’t be here because you don’t know how to speak academically, but actually, practically, you could walk out of there and put it into practice like that [snaps fingers]. But you think that’s not worth anything, because you can’t write it in an academic fashion.” (Yvonne, focus group, 9min)

“...it feels to me like it’s more important about how things are written, than what is written.” (Grace, focus group, 17min)

“...it’s not the knowledge, it’s getting the knowledge into the academic way of writing.” (Polly, 17min)

Therefore, given their strong identification as competent managers, and the rejection of a student identity, it is not surprising that when studying positioned students as inexperienced and lacking competence this created significant issues. This was particularly important when it occurred late in the programme of study, as Polly found;

"I suppose the biggest frustration was I was given a fail for the management research report and previous to that the large majority of modules that I'd completed were 70s and a couple of 60s... what it did to me, which I wasn't expecting, was it really knocked my confidence... to the point where I was physically upset, very emotional about it... confidence completely blown." (40min)

Clearly, having been to date a successful student, this sudden apparent failure was highly troubling. To some extent, Polly understands that much of this impact upon her sense of self comes, not from the mark, but from its implications for herself as a HRM practitioner, given her new role, and recent promotion. Further, the feedback from the university contrasted with the endorsement from her employer;

"...if I had been in the previous role I probably would have just [thought], aah, bugger that for a lark, and just got on with it. But going through a new kind of learning curve in the current role, when you know you are out of your comfort zone, coupled with that, yeah I think that was a lot of the reason, from a confidence point of view. I'm a really confident person, I couldn't understand my reaction to it actually." (43min)

In these accounts, and particularly in Polly's account of her experiences of marking, we can see the uncertainty of these liminal positions the participants hold across their communities of practice. These students experience the boundaries of the communities acutely, and due to the nature of part-time study, this occurs on an ongoing basis over the full three years of their studies. This, combined with the uncertain positions they hold in their careers, makes for an unsettling experience, one in which they constantly attempt to reinforce their legitimacy and expertise in their HRM communities while still being located in positions of novice in the academic community.

4.5.2 Observing Difference

The practice embedded locations of the participants meant that as well as thinking academic staff were out-of-date, they considered that much of the content failed to keep up with their experience of practice.

"...some of the literature, I mean there's obviously some up-to-date literature pieces but it can be quite dated... in the last kind of three to four years certainly, because of the kind of the wider financial implications... it doesn't take into consideration the current state that a lot of the organisations are in." (Cal, 8min)

While the currency of the content was an area of concern, also noted as problematic was the academic requirement for a textually based discourse, particularly in the depth of argument required, which was perceived as verbose in comparison to practice discourse;

"...if someone asks me for a report at work about something and I was to write it in a style that I write my university work, it would just be basically sent back to me and [they'd] say, come back to me with that but do it in a page rather than twenty... just give me the bullet points..." (Grace, 19min)

"...if I handed that report in to my superiors here, they would have just looked at it and threw it back to me and said no, I'm not interested in that... trim it right down and give us just the basic facts." (Brian, 9min)

"...truthfully I've got a completely different version that I've written to present to the HR leadership team, because there is no way in God's heaven they would get past two pages, never mind 8,000 words." (Polly, 29min)

A similarly problematic issue was the necessity for accurate citation;

"Harvard referencing, whoever came up with it should be shot... it was one of the biggest mysteries of the whole damn thing." (Yvonne, 45min)

Whilst this may be an expression of frustration at the presentational requirements the underlying issue appears to be the requirement for such underpinning more generally;

"I never struggle to have an opinion, but I struggled to have an opinion where I had to back it with someone else's, where I wasn't allowed an original thought. Unless you said something and you could back it with some else's experience or theory or whatever then you couldn't make that claim." (Yvonne, 10min)

This uncomfortable alignment between their professional expertise and the academic literature can be seen in the surprise expressed when the participants find places where the two co-locate. In this it is worth noting the use of 'common sense' to express this;

"I've been doing it for such a long time, well I didn't realise somebody had actually coined a theory. My god, they're getting paid for common sense. [Laughs]... I struggled with having to put someone else's name to something that I understood, and just did as a matter of course." (Yvonne, 11min)

"I find it very interesting to learn about the academic side of it and the background behind it and the different leadership theories and management styles, but a lot of the time... I would just kind of think... was that not just common sense... it is just something that I have naturally adapted without ever having read the theory behind it." (Grace, 15min)

This also worked in reverse, with surprise being focused on the fact that the theory they are reading, and which they have dismissed to some extent as out-of-date, underpins much of what they are doing. Given Brian's general view of the academic content, and academics, as out-of-date, this is an interesting counterpoint.

"...it was... strange to see... stuff I was thinking now, which I've experienced, say in the working world, many moons ago someone wrote about it and did full studies on it... some of it hadn't really changed. It was as if... what they found in their time, is what it is today, and it was interesting for me, digging back and finding that type of information out." (Brian, 31min)

One distinct difference was the potential freedom to explore possibilities in the academic setting, given the lack of the opportunities to do this in the workplace. This allowed the exploration of their opinions and ideas, albeit within the constraints presented by academic requirements;

"...there are definitely more opportunities to play than you will ever get in the workplace... if you get it wrong in the workplace the consequences can be huge, here the worst you can get is a bad mark... you had that opportunity to do that without hurting anybody, or there being a financial penalty... [at work] you have to toe a certain line, and you have to do it in a certain way, and there is only so much room for you in that..." (Yvonne, 48min)

"I suppose on the academic side you've got more of a wider scope... you can start actually pushing the boundaries, thinking outside the box to a degree... [at work] you really can't go off on a tangent... because you can't put the company... or the individuals you are dealing with at risk... but academically it technically doesn't really make much difference, you can question different things... you can have more of your opinion on the academic side..." (Brian, 29min)

However, accessing that freedom required the participants to overturn the ingrained practices in which they are steeped, which Polly found particularly problematic;

"...anybody who has been in an organisation you have a kind of 'the way we do things around here' so you would naturally have a set of priorities you would be aligned to within the organisation... that might be something that affects the way you write... because you have an end goal already in sight... that kind of implicit knowledge that comes from your work experience can drive you in a certain way because you are hoping to get to the conclusion, because you know what is expected... I think its swings and roundabouts in terms of how it benefits you." (22min)

To overturn these ingrained practices and discourses is difficult, given the deep immersion in practice in comparison to the peripheral engagement with academic community;

"I'm not used to kind of failing at anything... I'm used to things being at a certain quality. And, you know, getting it back and thinking it is not necessarily the content it is the way I am writing it... having to kind of translate between the two... in the academic environment it's looking more for the theory behind things... whereas in the practical environment critical analysis is totally different." (Grace, 11min)

"I couldn't see a way ahead, and I just closed in on myself, because I was in such an alien environment. Whereas if you stuck me at work with the same problem, I'd sit down, pull it all apart, get all the plans together, get the actions plans together, sort out the development strategies, and all that kind of thing. Be off and running. To write about it? It was like my brain just sort of went into free fall." (Yvonne, 9min)

In these accounts we can see that currency of academic content is the most significant feature for the participants, in ways similar to the importance of currency of experience of academic staff. In managing this the transitions between the discourses is problematic, both in prosaic characteristics like length of texts, and the format of citations, but also in the more complex relationships between disciplinary bodies of knowledge and personal experience. They are surprised when theory relates to their practice, perhaps as a result of their out-grouping of academic staff from the practice community and struggle with the necessity to underpin arguments with academic sources. However, they also find a freedom unavailable to them in practice, even if doing so requires them to overturn the dominant discourse practices of their employment.

4.5.3 Dealing with Differences

For all of the participants the liminal nature of the academic and work boundary has been keenly felt in terms of discourse. These impacts have been varied, as while practice experience was felt to be beneficial in this, it also presented challenges, particularly when bringing this into academic writing. These issues were particularly acute initially, partly due to staff assuming a competence which the students didn't feel they had;

"I think the first year was really difficult, trying to work out what it was that was required. And the first mark that I got was my lowest mark, based on the fact that I didn't write it the way the university wanted it to be written. And you learn from that, and adapt how you would do it..."

I think there's a kind of assumption made that if you're a kind of conventional age, straight from school into undergrad and the postgrad [that] people are in that mindset, that kind of learning style... People who've been out of education for some time... it's completely changed. I think there was an assumption made early on, that we just knew that. So that was a kind of steep learning curve." (Grace and Polly, focus group, 8min)

"...with my professional experience, I think, a couple of tutors said to me, oh, you'll be fine if you just get a pass, along with your experience outside of here, you know the two together will be fine." (Yvonne, 4min)

In trying to navigate this assumption the study participants found feedback difficult to engage with, especially given the time pressured environment;

"I think when you are doing it part-time, it's difficult, you can't just nip round to see them. In order to see someone... you need to get out of work." (Grace, 13min)

Whilst this may have made transition more problematic, an emergent understanding of requirements did develop, as Grace suggests;

"...my grades in my first year are nothing like they were in the second and third, and that's because I think I spent my first year just getting used to doing academic writing again, as it had been such a long time since I had done it... once I kind of got used to what was required...learning from the feedback that I got from [the] assignment, it was easier in the second and third year I found to just be able to write it the way it was expected to be written." (11min)

This understanding also developed suddenly, particularly when provided with examples or exemplars, as Yvonne and Brian found;

"...until you know what it is that they are actually wanting you to write, you are kind of writing in mid-air, in space... we did that with [one module], circulated a couple around, literally for ten minutes... and it gave you an idea of what kind of things you needed to cover and how. Ahhh, epiphany moment!" (Yvonne, 85min)

"...it might have helped, if there was... a sort of like a dummy pack came across to say this is how we want your assignments done, this is how we want them presented and there always has to be a literature review or something like that with them." (Brian, 15min)

Even Cal's sustained engagement with studying didn't seem to provide greater familiarity with such discourse requirements;

"I found the academic writing tougher... if you're not practiced to writing in that way in the workplace, then having to write like that in the academic environment is two different things... the more I got into the course and obviously the longer we spent doing it, it was easier to switch between the two." (Cal, 10min)

For Polly, the experience has been one of the differing styles of writing, not least because her employer has distinct guidelines, contrasting directly with an academic writing style. This echoes her observations of work experience affecting viewpoint.

"...we have a real different way of writing in our organisation... we have all been tutored in this tone of voice course... so having to then move from that kind of less formal way of writing, to move back into a much more kind of academic way has been conflicting with what you do on a day to day basis, and funnily enough when I presented the management report to one of the HR Directors she said 'I love it but [Polly] why have you taken so many words to talk about something you could have done it in 2000, and it is really stuffy'. I said 'exactly, it is like a paradox'... I don't know, I just find it frustrating that you have still got to write in a certain way academically." (Polly, 12min)

One approach to resolving the challenge of using personal knowledge in writing is outlined by Yvonne, who tackled this by locating assignments in her work context, then adapting this to accommodate academic requirements, which she found helped her to cope.

"...I kind of learnt to do it in a work way, and then flip it back over and put the theory in. So that I knew it worked in practice, with the criticisms of things that did go right and don't go right and things like that, and then add the theory in afterwards." (7mins)

"...flipping it backwards is me thinking of the problem that I have been given from a working perspective, analysing it and laying it out in a way that I know would work in the working environment... turning it back over and starting with that as a plan and adding in theory... so I am using what I understand to form the basis of adding the other things rather than trying, because I just didn't in my head, couldn't understand... I had to read up on people's academic work and then I started to understand and then this thing about flipping it over. Just starting from a perspective I did understand gave me strength and understanding to add the other stuff." (66min)

To achieve this, and her understanding of citation, Yvonne immersed herself in the literature around the subject;

"I just started reading stuff on-line... academic journals, and all that kind of thing. The way they spoke, the way they incorporated other people's work, the way they added citations, and the various different ways that this was done and things like that. It was only when I started to read how it looked in practice that I started to get how it would then be incorporated into this document that I had already built, that I knew worked in reality and then practice, make it look like an academic piece of work but it actually probably started out as a workplace based thing." (68min)

Cal found this approach also helped;

"being able to link my experience and practice into academic writing, I found that far easier that way round... because I was able to talk about my own experience, what I'd done, and then sort of read around that, to find the theory to go around that, and the academic kind of underpinning for that. So I found that was, that way round, easier." (20min)

"I guess I stuck with what I knew initially and then went to the academic." (25min)

Indeed, despite his closer alignment to academic discourse Cal was unable to offer an example of when he had not started his assignment from his working perspective. However, this was not necessarily a widely used approach, as whilst Grace also used it, similarly finding reading helped her to develop an academic style, she found the need to find and use academic sources to underpin an argument problematic when it conflicted with her own knowledge. This led to an approach to writing assessments which seems to have placed significant personal strain on her.

"I guess it was reading other journals... recognising the way they were written, and taking on board the feedback I received on the back of each of the assignments and then just putting it into practice." (13min)

"...it almost feels a little bit like you can't have your own opinions, or if you do... you always have to find somebody who backs that up, rather than you just having a unique opinion,

because you are always... having to say this is what I believe and it is supported by x, y and z... It made me feel really restricted... I am trusted on a daily basis here to put forward my advice, that is what I do, I give advice... Sometimes I would write something and think, ok, that's really what I believe, but that opinion there has more evidence so I'll just go with that one... I would almost kind of compromise how I really felt about something or my real opinion if I could find something that had more evidence to it... that is something I would never do at work... I totally pride myself on being completely open and straightforward and sometimes I found myself doing, it was never so far that it would be an opposing opinion... but it might be slightly different and I would think well, there would be a lot of evidence to support that, so I'll go with that one... at work I would never compromise like that... it changes the subjects that you choose... because I certainly don't want to compromise my own ideas and if I choose a subject where I feel like I can't support what I believe then no matter how interesting I find it and no matter how much I want to do the report on it I am not going to do that, because I want to be able to offer a report where... my ideas I can support them with the theory." (Grace, 20-25min)

Perhaps some of this compromise comes about because of the time pressures these students face.

Cal is quite aware that time is a significant factor in his learning, and therefore in the marks he receives;

"...the marks I've been getting... have all been I would say kind of, early 50's to kind of 60 ...I'd say I'm pretty happy with them, and I guess if I was studying full-time I'd maybe be driven to get something even higher. But I think, based on everything that I've had going on and what have you, I'm quite content and happy with what I've been getting." (Cal, 26min)

"...I guess the marks reflect the time and effort I've been able to put into the study." (Cal, 27min)

These experiences show that while transitions into academic discourses and practices can happen quite suddenly, they also occur over time, supported by feedback, but only where time constraints allow for this. Another element involves examples, provided both by academic staff, but also by highly regarded practitioners experienced in academic settings. Transitions are not helped by academic engagement at times, perhaps because the discourses of practice are dominant, so overriding whatever temporary alignment is achieved. However, this dominant practice discourse can be helpful in an academic setting, offering a route to engagement with academic assessments. It provides a familiar and comfortable place to begin, allowing the student to move past tensions and engage with academic texts and work. Achieving a fuller immersion in academic work is difficult, given the time constraints. As a result, an alternative to 'flipping' discourses between settings is to

subsume practitioner experience to a conveniently accessible academic viewpoint. Given the importance participants placed on professional experience it is unsurprising that such an approach is very troubling for them.

4.5.4 *Theme Three – summary*

The experience of these boundaries can only be one of liminality, of bridging between the two, and this is apparent in the experiences of the discourses of both settings. While a student leaving a practice community to enter an academic one could be expected to eventually transition, the continual movement back and forth between the two creates both constant comparisons and uncertainties, compounded by similar unsettling locations within the practice community. This is then brought out in the challenges of accommodating discordant discourse practices, and in locating their expertise within their writing.

In tackling this, participants may seek to use familiar practice approaches, bringing them full circle. However, to successfully manage this requires an engagement with academic texts, and with the academic community, which their time pressured lives may not allow. While it could be expected that academic staff would support this, the presumption that such ‘experienced’ students will be able to cope, and the lack of time to fully engage with feedback means that the participants seek strategies that replicate academic discourse, something which often comes into conflict with their own experience and expert identities.

4.6 Experiencing Learning – The Interactions of the Landscape

For each of the participants, the experience of learning has brought these three aspects, of learning in a personal context, in a context of communities, and across boundaries, into play in differing ways, illustrating the interconnected nature of this landscape of learning. What follows are further short vignettes from the participant’s experiences which illustrate these. They encapsulate how the complex locations and interactions can affect individual experience. In practice, such interactions are

likely to be as diverse as the individual settings, so defy neat descriptions, and as such these five vignettes offer only a partial insight.

Brian's trade union experience appears to have easily transferred into HRM, making concerns with validity in this community less prominent for him, as he uses the qualification to leverage his career ambitions, evidencing how communities interact with personal contexts of learning. His issues are not around recognition of his practice experience, but that of others, in particular, the appropriateness of academic study in preparing less experienced students for the workplace, their lack of practice exposure, and the distance he perceives between academics and the practice community. This is expressed in his surprise when the two align, showing the perceptions of experience bleed between communities and discourses. Brian also offers an insight into how, even when not expressly evidenced, the interactions between personal and professional commitments is felt, particularly seen in his later reflection on the focus group discussion, which led him to express the request that recognition of family support be added to the consensus.

Cal's significantly differing professional setting, of employment within higher education, influences his view of academic discourse as congruent with his practice, but despite this, and his ongoing participation with study, he experiences issues with engagement. This illustrates a differing view of the interactions between community and discourse, running across this personal context. It is clear from his interview that he experiences significant issues from his wider personal commitments, even if these are not made explicit, and these seem to prevent Cal committing the time he feels would be required to achieve better grades, so influencing his level of engagement.

Brian and Cal also illustrate that familiarity with study and academic settings do not remove discordancy between the settings. This suggests that the issue is about transition, but also an inherent part of the experience, arguably arising from the ongoing engagement across community boundaries and the location of study in complex personal contexts.

Grace expresses a significant motivation to learn, partly to cement her authority over her team and reinforce her specialist HRM knowledge. However, the problematic use of personal opinion in academic discourse, which requires an engagement with literature which her personal circumstances precludes, drives her to a suppression of her professional knowledge which is greatly troubling, and leads to disappointment. This suggests a clear interaction between experience, as expressed in community membership and social identity, with the straddling of boundary practices, in particular discourses, and the troubling interactions this has for identity.

Polly meanwhile lacks confidence in her legitimacy within HRM, despite her own practice experience, which she feels is not recognised without CIPD qualifications. However, the dominant discourse style of her employer hampers her engagement, while her recent promotion has added to her uncertainty, leading to significant distress over an unsettling assessment experience. This complex alignment between community membership in her practice setting, compliance with the discourse expectations which support this, and the challenges of transferring this discourse across boundaries, is again indicative of how these factors interact.

Grace and Polly offer an interesting comparison, holding similar life positions as new mothers within the same employer, thereby allowing comparisons between discourse expectations from two perspectives. While Polly focuses on her employer's practices, Grace talks about the rules of academic writing and very little about the rules of practice writing. It may be that Grace's stronger motivation towards learning creates deeper participation, and a stronger alignment to academic discourse expectations, contrasting with Polly's more troubled relationship between her studies and her place in the practice community. For both however, the overriding factor is the personal context arising from motherhood, and the implications this has for both why they choose to enter HRM as a profession, thereby triggering study, and the restrictions motherhood places on the ability to engage with study.

Yvonne offers a final contrast, with her full-time studies enabling an insight and comparison with the part-time cohorts. She experiences significant identity challenges studying alongside students perceived as less experienced, but who also offer a means of transition into the academic discourse community. There is a tension between these two conceptions of expertise, requiring Yvonne to find ways of accommodating this, at times at the cost of her own sense of self and her competence. Her personal setting also influences this, triggered by bereavement, again emphasising that personal context is as significant as the professional or academic setting. Despite this, Yvonne's identity is as a professional, and this allows her to negotiate study utilising those skills and experiences, not least in approaching academic writing from within her practice experience. Whilst this transition was not easy, she appears to have most clearly developed strategies which enable the transfer across these settings through the 'flipping' of her discourse patterns.

For all five participants, the experience of learning across academic and practice settings has been one of complex ongoing transitions and accommodations, with underlying implications arising from personal circumstances. While these can be conceptualised within the three themes, the experience cannot be understood from one cluster individually, but only by viewing across these groupings.

4.7 Discussion

Instead of the usual IPA discussion of extant literature, this section offers a shorter reflection on the analysis, based on the more extensive discussion of Literature Review.

4.7.1 HRM – A Discipline, a Community, a Profession

The analysis demonstrates the uncertainty of HRM profession identity (Marchington, 2015; Stewart, Mills and Sambrook, 2015), and the encouragement of a blurring between HRM and wider management (CIPD 2015a). For the participants, whilst this allowed a relatively straightforward shift between career paths, this quickly brought them to face the significance of CIPD membership (CIPD 2015b; Carty, 2012) and the closure of the profession to those lacking CIPD credibility (Gilmore and Williams, 2007). Cal's account of his shift between L&D and HRM makes visible the subsuming of

L&D (Tosey *et al.*, 2014; McLagan, 2015), demonstrating how the two previously distinct professions are becoming amalgamated, although some professional difference, evident in the interest of HRM specialists in Cal's experience, remains. It is unsurprising that, given the dominance of CIPD accredited part-time postgraduate courses (Tosey *et al.* 2014; Stewart, Mills and Sambrook, 2014), and the role such qualification play in bridging practice communities (Kubiak *et al.*, 2015), all the participants saw this as their route to credibility within HRM. This makes the significance of this provision evident, either as an entry route into HRM, or to validate movement from line management.

This places engagement with higher education as the key to the CIPD gatekeeper qualification (Tosey *et al.*, 2014) and it is at this point conflicts arise. Suggestions that academic staff are not perceived as part of HRM (Tosey *et al.*, 2014; Hallier and Summers, 2011; Marchington, 2015) and of significant gaps between practitioners and academics (Rynes, Giluk and Brown, 2007; Guest 2007), are confirmed by the participants' setting aside of academics' professional experience as out-of-date and therefore not credible. Meanwhile, suggestions that much of this gap arises from differing academic and practice discourses (Deadrick and Gibson, 2007), pluralist academic views conflicting with unitarist CIPD views (Gilmore and Williams, 2007) and academics dismissing practitioner publication (Lawler, 2007), are confirmed in participants' views of academic discourse. Also visible is a strongly dismissive view of academic publishing as out-of-touch with practice settings, exemplified in Yvonne's questioning whether someone from outside HRM practice can publish about the profession. Bartenuk and Rynes' (2014) suggestion that these issues arise from the practitioner *and* academic CoP is insightful, given that some academics may be seen as inside the practice community, from the embodiment of this in teaching. The participant accounts cannot confirm the extent to which this perception of the currency of practice is correct, but it is clear that this affects the practitioner-student/academic relationship and engagement. Also visible is the frustration felt when practitioner-student experience is not readily and easily used in the classroom (Butcher, 2015). This research therefore partly fills the recognised gap within HRM pedagogy (Coetzer and Sitlington,

2012; Zachmeier and Cho, 2014) by offering insight into this student community, confirming the importance of practice knowledge (Cho and Zachmeier, 2015) and experienced peer learning (Bailey, 2015). Experience is paramount to the participants, providing a resource through which they develop their academic engagement, but creating problematic demarcations between themselves, student peers, and academic staff.

4.7.2 *Part-time, Mature, Postgraduate Student Experience*

While study as a lever to career change (Yorke and Longden, 2008; McVitie and Morris, 2012; Morgan, 2015; Leman, 2016) and redefined professional identity (Warhust, 2011), is recognised, HRM may be a particularly acute example, given the normality of part-time study to achieve this (Tosey *et al.*, 2014). The study participants' accounts consequently also help fill recognised gaps around postgraduate taught student experience (Morgan, 2015; Tobbell, O'Donnell and Zammit, 2008, 2010; Tobbell and O'Donnell, 2013; Prince *et al.*, 2015). In particular, while issues around time are well recognised (Butcher, 2015; McLinden, 2013; Callender, Hopkin and Wilkinson, 2010), as are the family life sacrifices required to enable study (Butcher, 2015; Williams and Kane, 2010; Bruce 2010), and the impacts of complex funding availabilities (Dunne, 2016; Universities UK, 2013), what has not been as clear are the interactions between time, funding and employment. While the anticipated career benefits of part-time study are noted (Leman, 2016; McVitie and Morris, 2012; Yorke and Longden, 2008), this is tempered with resentment both towards employers who fail to recognise such development (Lester and Costley, 2010) and towards studying more generally (Anderson, Huggins and Whitfield, 2015). What is apparent from these experiences is that a further dimension exists, in which an interaction between the scant resource of time and the obligation of employer funding, creates a setting in which practitioner-students feel compelled to excel in both their work and study roles, justifying their employers' investment, and also the time spent away from family. This creates a pressure cooker effect, making failure, or withdrawal from study, seemingly impossible, and creating the framework into which engagement with study while employed sits.

4.7.3 Communities, Multi-Memberships and Identities

The third phase of CoP focuses on how identity and knowledgability function across landscapes of higher education and practice. In this it continues to reflect the view of identity, within CoP, as being about mutual constitution of individual and community, and the participants' accounts demonstrate the complex trajectories created, making explicit their views themselves and others within HRM practice and academic settings. These accounts also re-emphasise this CoP view of identity, being drawn from the consistent use of descriptions of themselves in relation to others.

The rejection of a student identity, echoes Butcher's (2015) and Crossan *et al.*'s (2003) findings regarding part-time and mature students, and the accounts suggest that the combination of maturity and highly peripheral, incomplete part-time study, makes this rejection inevitable.

Wenger's (1998, p.89) assertion that 'it is not easy to become a radically new person in the same community of practice' is in tension with the engagement required by studying at the same time.

While it is suggested that 'casual but legitimate access' of a community can be achieved through partial membership (Wenger, 1998, p.117), students are required to submit fully to the discourse demands of the academic community. So, while Fenton-O'Creevy *et al.* (2015a, 2015b) suggests that alignments to academic communities are provisional and temporary for practice-based students, it seems more extreme than that. Essentially alignments are tolerated only to achieve qualification, and are so less immersive than this model suggests. Indeed, rather than the trajectories suggested, a far more liminal path appears, oscillating between settings, and in which transition to new professional settings may have already taken place to some degree. An adaption of Fenton-O'Creevy *et al.*'s (2015) model, as previously illustrated in Figure 2.3: Fenton-O'Creevy *et al.* (2015a), is possible.

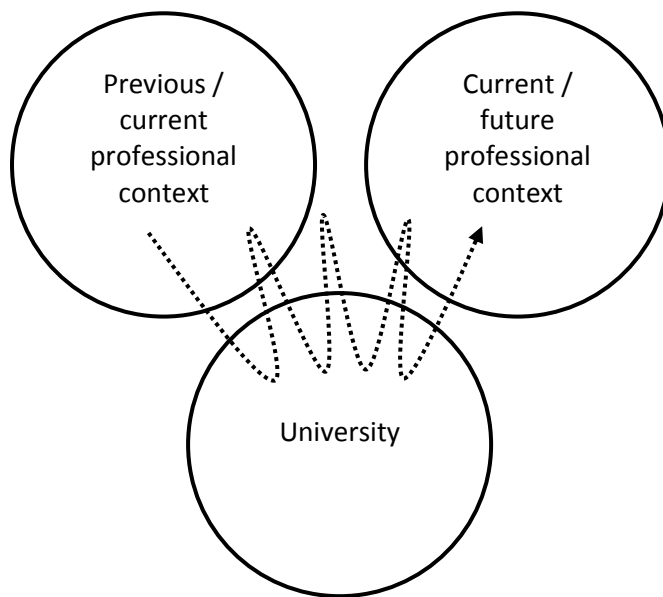


Figure 4.3: Development of Fenton-O'Creevy *et al.*'s Model

This development seeks to reflect the oscillation, demonstrating that whilst the shift between professional settings is intended as a one-way move, the engagement with study is inherently liminal. This liminality is represented by the wavering line which moves from the existing professional context, via the university setting, into the future professional context. This replaces the suggested three trajectories proposed by Fenton-O'Creevy, with a single, individualised trajectory, with the exact path unknown, hence the broken line used to represent this. What such two-dimensional models fail to capture are the other aspects which clearly affect these experiences, including the wider personal contexts, and the impact of timing on such transitions. To do so would perhaps require three or four-dimensional models, thereby exposing the topology over which such trajectories occur.

One issue unanswered by Fenton-O'Creevy *et al.* (2015) is about the ease with which a tourist or sojourner trajectory can be held when to do so means the adoption of practices which contrast heavily with the professional practices required of an inbound trajectory of a professional community. Visiting the academic community may be intended to offer a transformative space for professional identity, but creates tensions which may lead to a rejection of academic identity by the

practitioner-student, and in turn, a rejection of the academic community, creating a rebounding into the practice community. Wenger (1998, p215) suggests learning communities function through trajectories which relate to an individual's past and future, in part by 'opening trajectories ... that place engagement in its practice in the context of a valued future'. As such, tourist and sojourner trajectories require academic communities to both recognise and respect students practice experience, and align academic approaches to future practice requirements. Failure to achieve this creates marginal engagements which are more tourist than sojourner – and only in the latter does compliance with the academic setting becomes relevant to their future trajectory.

These peripheral boundary locations are also complicated by the inherent liminality of being simultaneously an experienced manager, a new entrant to HRM and a returner to academia. Whilst such liminal experiences may be seen as rites of passage and survival (Meyer and Land, 2006b), the description of this as 'pure hell' by Polly emphasises the challenges faced. Also evident are the complexities of multi-membership and trajectories which require the straddling of boundaries, something recognised as inherent in the positioning of postgraduate and mature students as novices (Crossan *et al.*, 2003; Scott *et al.*, 2014). The whole experience of studying is bound up in the troublesome transfer of experience and knowledge across the boundaries, and so the student accounts in this study help fill some of the gap in knowledge highlighted by many authors (e.g. Gherardie and Nicolini (2002; Hughes, Jewson and Unwin, 2007; Mørk *et al.*, 2008; Chen and Chuang, 2010; Kislov, 2014), concurring with James' (2007) suggestion of segregated and fractured positions of expertise.

Given that expertise is located in the practices of communities, and as such may not transfer (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002) and despite constellations acting as resources for learning (Hughes, Jewson and Unwin, 2007), the transference between practice located experience and academic study is clearly complex. Kasworm (2003) identified that multi-memberships create settings in which expertise is not recognised by academic staff, leading to discomfoting experiences

of assessment for mature undergraduates, and the accounts in this study demonstrate this is also acute at postgraduate level, given the importance of recognition of experience for the practitioner-students. Therefore, while Fenton-O'Creevy *et al.*'s (2015b) assertion that student multi-memberships expose learners to experiences of incompetence when their experience is not accommodated is correct, the suggestion that boundaries between settings are invisible to students is not, given the articulation in the accounts of the shock and frustration the boundaries cause.

Professionally, these liminal locations are created in the challenges of managing the alignment between competence in HRM and knowledgeability across multiple CoP, as defined by Wenger-Traynor *et al.* (2015), in particular the problematic transfer of line management experience into HRM via CIPD recognition, and between the academic and practice worlds of HRM. While these boundaries can act positively, becoming places for reflection, as Akkerman and Bakker (2011) suggest, the accounts in this study are perhaps more illustrative of Kubiak *et al.*'s (2015a) 'incongruent' multi-memberships, given the examples of practices, especially around discourse, which cannot transfer due to their perceived unsuitability.

These accounts of participants' multiple CoP and their perceptions of others within these offer insights about such intersections. Social identity theory suggests that the reframing of lower status out-groups and flattering dimensions of in-groups helps maintain positions (Reicher, Spears and Haslam, 2010), and examples can be seen in the participants' views of practitioners, academics and other students. Their identities as practitioner-students are therefore reinforced by how they relate to and locate others within this framework of concurrent academic and practice memberships. The preference towards academic engagement and wider experience may well be a way of creating a dimension to reframe other practitioners as out-groups, but it also helps reinforce their own choices and efforts as relevant and valuable. This is interesting in light of Hallier and Summers' (2011) study of undergraduate HRM students which suggests that orientations between communities and social identities shift between alignments to practice and academic settings. However, this was influenced

by limited practice exposure, giving rise to incongruence between expectations and experiences. These accounts demonstrate a similar but obverse relationship, with the academic out-grouping creating default practice-aligned identities, and where stronger alignments are created by incipient academic career paths.

While part-time practitioner-students are seen as part of the HRM practitioner community, the delineations between participation and non-participation, and the acceptance of non-participation, reinforces the significance of experience for the group, a recognised effect of identity within social learning groups (Hughes, 2010), and of the perceived necessity of experience to study HRM/D (Cho and Zachmeier, 2014). As wider relationships within student communities are significant, (Tobbell and O'Donnell, 2013), the rejection of student identities, placing them outside of this community, may be particularly acute given the infrequent engagement between the full-time and part-time cohorts.

The participants view full-time students as deficient in knowledge and experience, echoing similar observations elsewhere. For example, Grace's views of the full-time cohort clearly illustrate Meyer and Land's (2006a) observations of the irreversible thresholds crossed by practitioners, who look back on less experienced students and wonder how they will cope, forgetting that they were once in a similar position and learned the community rules. Meanwhile the discussions of students who do not contribute, and the differing views taken of this, adds to suggestions that experience and knowledge have a significant role in student participation (Coetzer and Sitlington, 2014; Cho and Zachmeier, 2014) and echoes Kasworm's (2003) distinction of mature 'outside voice' students viewing themselves as more knowledgeable than their younger peers. In contrast, Yvonne's membership of full-time and part-time cohorts, and her views of full-time students as less experienced, but as more academically confident, reflects observations of mature students' experiences as socially distanced from the wider student body, whilst supporting lesser experienced students (Hughes, 2010).

Meanwhile, academic staff are clearly viewed as an out-group based upon perceptions of practice experience currency (Reicher, Spears and Haslam, 2010) allowing students to raise their in-group status against a more powerful academic one. This aligns to Kasworm's (2003) suggestions of a student preference for academics who value and utilise students 'real-world' knowledge in their teaching above academics who are seen as unknowledgeable about practice settings. Indeed, the significance of academics locating themselves within both their academic and disciplinary CoP is well recognised (Wenger, 1998; James, 2007). Meanwhile Tobbell, O'Donnell and Zammit's (2010) view of academics as 'full participants' in their communities, may indicate shifts so complete that the alignment with the practice community is lost, and thereby the pathway for practitioner students to engage, or to identify with, is also lost.

This reinforces the concept of competence in single CoP against knowledgeability across multiple CoP (Wenger-Traynor and Wenger-Traynor, 2015) as while academic staff may be competent, their knowledgeability is recognised only in alignment to the students' views of the communities. As such Hallier and Summers' (2011) suggestion that HRM academics differ from practice academics in other professional disciplines seems correct. Significantly, while concerns about professional standing are a common feature of academic life (James, 2007), student transitions to academic communities rely in part on perceptions of staff suitability (Tobbell and O'Donnell, 2013) making practitioner-student judgements about staff legitimacy and concurrency within practitioner CoP important. These accounts demonstrate that suitable engagement is dependent upon a commonality of experience and a sense of an aligned and cohesive community, making the need for staff to be able to communicate their experience, and locate themselves within practitioner CoP particularly significant.

The mapping of these communities offers one of very few specific examples of how constellations or landscapes of practice can be conceptualised or visualised (e.g. Fenton O'Creevy *et al.*, 2015a, Nishino, 2012) given the absence of examples for the HRM postgraduate student community. This

research therefore fills some of the gap regarding students' experiences, in particular the complexities and interactions of postgraduate study (Tobbell, O'Donnell and Zammitt, 2010), and the fractured memberships inherent in multiple communities (James, 2007), while at the same time adding to our knowledge of CoP located in these settings. These settings exemplify the 'sustained mutual relationships' found in CoP, of the overlaps in memberships and belonging, and the perspectives on the world created therein (Wenger, 1998, p125), and the visibility of such boundaries (Fenton-O'Creevy *et al.*, 2015b).

A CoP is a location of 'mutual engagement' through the processes of community maintenance, requiring 'not only our competence, but also the competence of others' (Wenger, 1998, p.76) in 'complementary' and 'overlapping' contributions. As such, positive and negative relationships exist. For example, the support of other practitioner-students is beneficial, while other HRM professionals are seen as being complementary and overlapping. Meanwhile the academic/practice gap (Personini, Cruz and Wood Jr, 2015; Rynes, 2007) is crystallised in the views of academic staff as out-of-touch, and therefore not competent in, or complementary to, the practice community. This combines with a rejection of academic theory by practitioners, also noted by Fenton-O'Creevy *et al.* (2015a) in the experiences of community landscapes across academic and practice boundaries and is perhaps typical of the peripheral trajectories across and between these settings. Such views of these incompatibilities clearly come out of the issues of belonging and performing identified by Bartenuk and Rynes (2014), confirming their view that these incompatibilities solidify identities as practitioners or academics, and so impact upon experiences of study.

4.7.4 Learning Approaches, Discourses Practices and Academic Literacies

Given the prominence of discourse in understanding education through a CoP context (Lea, 2006; Ivanič, 2004) it is unsurprising that issues of discourse across boundaries feature heavily in the participants' accounts, illustrating recognised issues of discursive shifts between communities (Wenger, 1998; Meyer and Land 2006b) and the problematic movement from practice settings into

academic forums (Fenton-O'Creevy et al, 2015; Lea, 1998). For the participants, the reification of their experience into academic writing is felt to challenge their competency in both settings. Academic writing is keenly felt as an area of uncertainty, compounded by assumptions of competence by teaching staff, a recognised, if understudied, issue of postgraduate study (Hallett, 2010; Anderson, Huggins and Whitfield, 2015). The participants' experiences of writing also highlight the socially embedded nature of literacy (Lea, 1998), best seen in their framing of academic discourse as unsuitable for practice settings, not least in the verbosity of academic discussion. Issues of knowledge and power, key within academic literacies (Lea, 2005; Lea and Street, 1998), are visible here in the complex alignments of practitioner-students as academic novices, alongside 'expert' academics whose apparent lack of practice experience places them in less significant positions in practice settings.

Overcoming these discourse challenges takes multiple forms. Cal's delineation between work and study echoes the recognition of the necessity of switching practices (Lea and Street, 1998; Hardy and Clughen, 2012), while 'flipping' practice into academic acceptable forms, provides a demonstration of how that this can be achieved through the adaption of previous practices to university (Lea and Street, 1998). Meanwhile, Lea's (1998) classification of texts are evident in Grace's attempts to locate her experience in her writing, embodying the *challenging* classification, but she eventually aligns her discussion to the academic texts instead, characteristic of Lea's (1998) *reformulation* classification. These configurations of practice experience, as a key aspect of their identity, and their differing communities, echo Ivanič (1998), and to some extent Scott *et al.* (2014), regarding the understanding of how identity is managed across boundaries, in particular the balances being struck between the knowledge base of experience against the theoretical demands of academia, with both placed in the context of simultaneously attempting to validate such experience in professional settings.

Superficially this may be about verbosity (Askham, 2008) or referencing and citation (Lea and Street, 1998; Barton and Hamilton, 2005), but at an underlying level it is about the authority embodied in the individual, and their capacity to lay claim to that knowledge in their writing. To make such claims compliant with the academic discourse requires an engagement with literature, which contrasts with practices of the workplace (Nielson, 2010; Bartenuck and Rynes, 2014) and most significantly requires time the practitioner-students feel unable to offer. This again emphasises the impact that underlying issues of context have on experience. The distinct character of this discourse is recognised, and while Northedge (2003a) showed this in an undergraduate programme, we can see that it is perhaps more acute at postgraduate level, given the senior roles of practitioner-students, making the leap to novice academic positions greater. What is unclear from previous studies is how complex this is when it occurs on a continuing basis, given the ongoing boundary crossing of these practitioner-students. Northedge (2003a) suggests that deep approaches are necessary and it is not possible to 'dip into' discourses. Additionally, Fenton-O'Creevy *et al.* (2015a) suggest that 'sojourner' routes take deeper approaches in contrast to the surface routes of 'tourist' students, but the participants' accounts suggest that surface routes predominate, even in those with closer alignments to academic communities such as Yvonne and Cal.

This helps to further inform our understanding of the wider social context in the approaches to learning of practitioner-students. Whilst authors such as Tynjälä (2013) and Marsick, Connor and Watkins (2011) have nuanced the contextual presage implications beyond simplistic views and personal characteristics, the accounts offer insight into what may lead to the differing approaches of surface, deep and strategic. This leads to a nuanced iteration of these models, articulating the ways in which context of intersecting contexts of personal, professional and academic engagements creates distinct presaging factors of student obligations of time and finance, which are combined with academic conceptions and assumptions of student competence. These lead to processes in which the adaption of dominant discourse patterns, or suppression of practitioner experience to accessible academic viewpoints, creates distinct alignments and approaches to study.

These are shown in Figure 4.4: Development of Presage, Process and Product Model, which attempts to conceptualise these visually, adapting further the models of Biggs (1989), Price (2011, 2014), Marsick, Connor and Watkins (2011) and Tynjälä (2013). In doing so, this model attempts to make more explicit the significance of the context of the setting, and the intersection of the personal, professional and academic settings in affecting engagement, by foregrounding this.

In the presage grouping, it highlights the implications of the factors particular to the practitioner-students, suggesting that the complexity of time and financial commitments are key drivers for such engagement, and that the generally presumed competence of such students by academics is significant. This nuances the discussion of presage factors more closely to the contexts of practitioner-students.

These two factors lead to engagement that has significant effects on the development of surface or deep approaches to learning, though the development of process factors relating to writing, which in turn influence the product of learning approaches. The adaption of dominant practice writing styles, which consequently requires an engagement with academic literature to make this suitable for assessment, consequently leads to strategic or deeper learning approaches. In contrast, the adoption of writing styles which subsume practice knowledge for readily available academic literature, even where this is in conflict to practitioner experience and knowledge, create a surface engagement with learning. This choice is driven to some extent by the scarcity of time, and in the absence of guidance from academic staff.

As such, the presage factors of time, finance and assumed competence appear as key to the development of processes of writing which, in some cases, mitigate against deeper learning approaches, driving strategic and surface engagements.

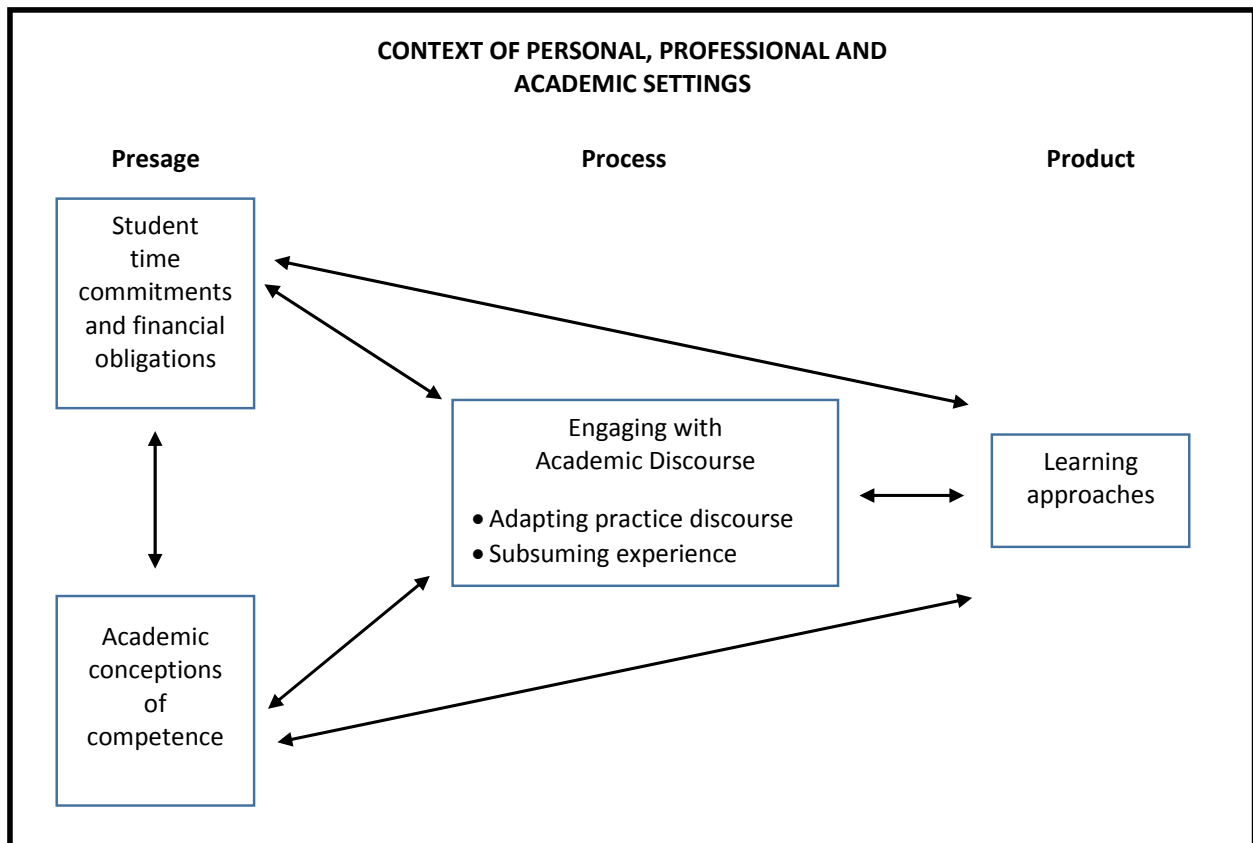


Figure 4.4: Development of Presage, Process and Product Models

Fenton-O’Creivy *et al.*’s (2015a) suggestion that deep approaches require a sojourner trajectory across practice and academic communities, and that tourist trajectories are more aligned to a strategic mimicry of academic discourse and of learning. These alignments are partly created by the liminal, boundary straddling locations of such practitioner-students. The participants all appear to take strongly strategic approaches, even those who, like Grace or Yvonne, express a desire towards a deeper engagement with the subject, and with the academic community. In effect the obligations they are under drive them towards strategic compliance and mimicry and away from the deeper understanding they may wish to develop, but which is too demanding to achieve. Indeed, to develop deep understandings would require them to forego the expert positioning they are beginning to carve out, and this may be a cost they are unwilling to bear. This may confirm suggestions that deep approaches are associated with strong student identities (Bluic *et al.*, 2011; Platow *et al.*, 2013; Smyth *et al.*, 2015) given the lack of such identification amongst the participants. As such, the

Fenton-O'Creevy *et al.* (2015a) model may not reflect the act of continual boundary crossing required over a three-year part-time qualification. Whilst the understanding of, or accommodation to, academic knowledge and discourse practices may develop over such programmes, the challenges of accommodating personal expertise in these, and of transmitting this between the two, do not appear to lessen.

4.8 Conclusion

Across the five accounts of the lived experience exist three key themes, of the location of study in wider personal contexts, of self in the communities in which practitioner/students engage, and of the experiences of these liminal academic/practice boundaries, and evidence how these interact to create complex negotiations about self, community and experience.

Study occurred in transitions between careers and communities, against a backdrop of scant resources. Finance and time create complex obligations, making an unsuccessful engagement with study too costly to tolerate, while also requiring commitment to employers to repay investment. These transfers place practitioner-students in positions where professional experience is not taken-for-granted, necessitating qualifications to validate their expertise. As such, while CIPD qualification is significant in successful transitions, it places individuals in positions where their locations in, and relationships to, their wider social settings are called into doubt, given the novice identities imposed by academic institutions.

Study also occurs across clearly defined communities of practitioners, students and academics. In these practice experience is used to delineate between members, endowing prestige and authority on those who demonstrate and embody HRM and wider management experience. Relationships between these communities exist, but are fragmentary, and problematised by this delineation.

Together, complex resources, limited time for study, and delineations of practice experience create a setting in which part-time study is troubling. This is particularly apparent in the relationship

between knowledge in the different settings. Straddling these boundaries is attempted by locating assessments in the familiar practice setting, moving into less familiar, challenging academic contexts, but is contingent on time available, alongside negotiations of discourses characteristics. Strategies to achieve this tend towards the development of writing styles based on practice models, elaborated to suit academic requirements, thereby requiring significant backfilling of theory to fit professional opinion. Where this cannot be achieved, professional views are set aside, thereby creating a conflict with the individual as an experienced manager and a novice academic.

Transitions which should be supported by processes designed for traditional students fail to recognise that practitioner-students are different. Academics assume practitioner-students are experienced, and will cope, failing to recognise that their study experience has long since been set aside for practice approaches, the experience of which is incompatible to academic settings. These issues create surface engagements with academic study, wherein restricted time to immerse oneself in discourse combines with views of academics as an out-group of the HRM practice community, dismissed as not relevant to practice. Also apparent are issues of currency, in terms of the theory and content of study being seen as relevant to practice, academics currency within practice communities, and with the topics studied being aligned to workplace priorities. As such, the issues are not just of time, but of timing.

In response the approaches taken to study become contingent on the ease in which they can be achieved, despite the conflicts this creates with a strongly held sense of expertise, which studying is meant to validate. As such, engagement with part-time study, undertaken to support the relocation of experience into a new practice community, consists of complex trade-offs and accommodations between these settings, engaged with on a peripheral and temporary basis.

5 Conclusions

5.1 Introduction

This final chapter is intended to complete the research journey, and in doing so begins by restating the intended purpose of the research, its conceptual framework, and the design used regarding data collection and analysis. There follows an outline of the three main themes identified from this process, alongside the interactions between these themes, and a short discussion of how these contribute to our knowledge of practitioner-students. Issues of quality and validity are also explored. The application of this knowledge to practice is considered, both in how this has been applied personally during this research journey, and how it may be applied by others in future. Recommendations are made for other education practitioners supporting similar students. Finally, the chapter revisits this research journey from two personal perspectives. Firstly, a hypothetical look back by the research participants, bearing in mind what is incorporated in the thesis about their views and experiences. Secondly, a personal review over the course of this research in straddling practice and academic boundaries.

5.2 Research Purpose

This research set out to encapsulate the experiences of practitioner-students engaged with practice as an HRM professional while studying as a postgraduate part-time. Specifically, it wished to understand how these experiences interacted and affected each other doing so by focussing on specific aspects of engagement with communities across boundaries, and of experiences of discourse and identity within these.

5.2.1 *Aims and Objectives*

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of one cohort of part-time postgraduate HRM students, engaged in parallel work and study, and the interactions between their practitioner and student identities.

The objectives were to;

- Review appropriate literature around the related areas of HRM profession and education, part-time, postgraduate and mature student experience, communities of practice, approaches to learning, and the roles of identity and discourse practices in education, in order to inform the later analysis.
- Undertake primary research using focus group and individual subsequent interviews, conducted at the end of a three-year postgraduate qualification in one HEI, with a small sample of practitioner-students.
- Identify, through the use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, ways in which these parallel work/study experiences impact upon individuals and their membership of practitioner and academic communities, their learning and their engagement with academic literacies.
- Develop individual themes from the data which illustrate these experiences, and then underpin these themes with cross-theme analysis including case vignettes.

5.2.2 Conceptual Framework

The research was conceptually framed by this focus on individual experiences of learning, within professional, academic and personal settings, thereby requiring a focus on individualised experience. It was informed by the extant research into HRM as both professional and educational disciplines, and by the understanding of the experiences of part-time, mature and postgraduate students. It was significantly framed within the third phase of communities of practice, and further informed by literatures around identity within communities, specifically social identity theory, and of discourse experienced within communities and education, in particular academic literacies.

The conceptual frame, and the ways in which this relates to each section of the thesis, can be seen throughout the thesis in the constituent parts relating to each chapter, and in Figure 1.1: Conceptual

Framework, Figure 2.1: Conceptual Framework – Supporting Literatures, Figure 2.2: Conceptual Framework - Interactions of Personal Life, Employment and Studying, Figure 3.1: Conceptual Framework – Relationship to IPA and Figure 4.1: Conceptual Framework - Analysis Themes.

5.2.3 Research Design and Boundaries

This focus on individual experience led to the use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. By utilising innovative approaches to focus group facilitation, alongside the archetypal IPA method of semi-structured interviews, significant new data was obtained. This was analysed through IPA based thematic analysis, but also through the development of case vignettes, thereby deepening the understanding of each participant and their lived experience. Such understanding is therefore individual, nuanced by the particular environment of each participant, and not generalisable to the wider population, but offers insight into other individual experiences and suggests possible broader approaches through the key themes.

5.3 Findings

Whilst the research is driven from an idiographic, individualised focus, three distinct themes could be seen across the experiences of the practitioner-student participants. These were the ways in which part-time postgraduate study was positioned in the personal and professional context of each individual, the ways in which those individuals located themselves and others in the communities in which they engaged, and the ways in which they negotiated the boundaries between academic and practice communities. All of these related to the conceptual idea of landscapes and constellations of practice, and of the negotiation with, and trajectories within, them.

The nexus of studying whilst managing career transition creates situations where the necessity to be successful in studies, thereby justifying employer or personal financial commitment, conflicts with a similar necessity to be successful in newly established professional roles. In this time becomes a scant and significant resource, in ways which have significant implications for learning. Study triggered by career transitions also creates complex interactions between expert and novice

identities across the academic and practice communities. The significance of expertise in practice settings is embodied in the views of, and interactions with, members of each community, with practice experience used to delineate in these, and where lack of practice experience affects the perceived legitimacy of academic expertise.

In crossing these academic-practice boundaries practitioner-students negotiate differing practices. Such negotiations are complex, requiring the adaption of dominant practice discourses to suit academic expectations. The approaches taken to learning thereby are significantly affected by both the implications of part-time study as time intensive, and the views of the academic community as not necessarily practice relevant, compounded by the assumptions of academic staff regarding the academic competence of practitioner-students. Practitioner-students consequently develop approaches to learning which foreground and adapt their practice experience, and are most successful where a concurrency between the two can be achieved. Where this cannot occur, the subsuming of practice expertise for dominant academic discourses is troubling for practitioner-students given the purpose of study to validate their experience.

Practitioner-student experience is therefore determined by the negotiation of the academic-practice community boundary, delineated and influenced by the embodiment of expertise and underlined by peripheral and transient academic engagement. Underlying this, and perhaps most significantly contributing to it, is the personal and professional context of the individual.

5.4 Contribution to Knowledge

This research provides several contributions to knowledge. These are in the application of the consensus technique to research, the understanding of the experiences of part-time students, particularly within HRM, the mapping of the landscapes and constellations of practice experienced by these practitioner-students, and the understanding of the approaches to learning created by the settings of these students. In this, it addresses the gaps in understanding of practitioner-student

experience within HRM, offering both insight into the broad experience and a more detailed view of some of the implications this has for student approaches to learning.

The first of these contributions is the method used to undertake the first stage of the data collection, through the adaptation of the ICA consensus workshop technique. This offers an innovative application of a technique, which whilst not designed for this purpose is suitable for use within IPA, and more widely within focus group data collections. In particular, the adaption of the technique to retain individual contributions enables it to provide the idiographic quality which makes focus groups less suitable for IPA (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009), potentially overcoming issues of group speak and dominance (Bryman, 2012), thereby offering a resolution to this gap in the application of focus groups within IPA. Furthermore, the collaborative sorting and naming of the data by participants is supportive of a power shift from the researcher to the participant, and of authentic interpretations of the data. These stages are similar to the stages of analysis within IPA (Smith and Osbourn, 2008; Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009), further strengthening the applicability of the technique to this particular approach.

The second contribution to knowledge is the insight this study provides, through the thematic analysis and the case vignettes, into the experiences of part-time students, which is recognised as gap in knowledge. In particular, Theme One – Locating Part-time Postgraduate Study in a Wider Personal Context, contributes understanding of the implications for practitioner-students in negotiating the complex balances between time, work and personal commitments, and the obligations to justify the commitment of resources including funding. These can be seen in all three themes, but are perhaps best captured in Figure 4.4 and the accompanying discussion. This resolves some of the recognised gap in understanding about such students, given that these issues are not well understood (Tobbell, O'Donnell and Zammit, 2008, 2010; Tobbell and O'Donnell, 2013; Morgan, 2015; Prince *et al.*, 2015), due to the fragmentary nature of the literatures in these areas (i.e. Callender, Hopkin and Wilkinson, 2010; Williams and Kane, 2010; Bruce 2010; McLinden, 2013;

Universities UK, 2013; Butcher, 2015 Dunne, 2016), and as such this research offers an insight into their interactions within a specific segment of the postgraduate market.

The third contribution is the illustration of how practice and academic communities within HRM are perceived, in particular in Theme Two – Locating Self in Landscapes of Practice and Constellations of Communities, but also in Figure 4.2 and the supporting discussions. This illustrates the recognised suggestions of gaps between the practice and academic communities (Rynes, Giluk and Brown, 2007; Guest 2007; Lawler, 2007; Deadrick and Gibson, 2007; Gilmore and Williams, 2007; Hallier and Summers, 2011; Tosey et al, 2014; Marchington, 2015). These are thought to be created in part by views of academics as not part of practice communities, but also by the divisions apparent between discourses, and this study contributes examples of how this is experienced by these practitioner-students. The research also significantly contributes to the understanding of HRM pedagogy, by illustrating how practitioner-students experience postgraduate education, given the recognised dearth of studies into this (Coetzer and Sitlington, 2012; Zachmeier and Cho, 2014), emphasising the necessity of recognition and utilisation of experience within education (Coetzer and Sitlington, 2012; Zachmeier and Cho, 2014; Cho and Zachmeier, 2015; Bailey, 2015; Butcher, 2015). In this it adds to HRM pedagogy by offering a pluralist view, arising from the epistemological and ontological position, which aligns to the academic HRM community but contrasts to the often unitary practice area. The research also contributes a further example of further of the interaction between practice and academic identity for students, expanding Hallier and Summers' (2011) exploration of undergraduate students into practice experienced postgraduate cohorts.

The fourth contribution is to the developing understanding of learning across academic and practice communities through both knowledgeability and trajectories, supporting to the emphasis on this within the third phase of communities of practice (Wenger-Traynor and Wenger-Traynor, 2015). It offers a conceptualisation of a particular constellation and landscape of practice, shown in Figure 4.2, while Figure 4.4 supports an understanding of how learning may occur across these (Gherardi

and Nicolini, 2002; Hughes, Jewson and Unwin, 2007; Mørk *et al.*, 2008; Chen and Chuang, 2010; Kislov, 2014), thereby filling the existing gaps. In addition, this study contributes to understanding of trajectories across such community boundaries, suggesting a development, in Figure 4.3, of Fenton-O'Creevy *et al.*'s (2015a, 2015b) models, nuancing these from simple direct routes into more liminal engagements, illustrating these with the first example within HRM postgraduate student communities. Whilst Wenger (1998, pp.246-7) suggests that such 'global understanding' at the level of practice cannot be complete, these views offer insight and explication.

In this, the research also contributes an understanding of the complexities inherent in transferring experience and knowledge across boundaries and between positions of novice and expert (Crossan *et al.*, 2003; James, 2007; Scott *et al.*, 2014), most clearly found in Theme Three – Experiencing Academic and Practice Boundaries. The study therefore also fills the recognised gaps in this knowledge (e.g. Gherardie and Nicolini (2002; Hughes, Jewson and Unwin, 2007; Mørk *et al.*, 2008; Chen and Chuang, 2010; Kislov, 2014). The experiences documented in this study therefore also contribute an illustration of how the adoption of tourist or sojourner trajectories (Fenton-O'Creevy *et al.*, 2015a) across boundaries with disjointed practices is not straightforward. The research also contributes by suggesting that far from such boundaries being 'invisible' to practitioner-students, or significant in creating 'productive' identities, as Fenton-O'Creevy *et al.* (2015b, p.151) suggest, the tensions and conflicts are only too apparent, and are the locations of significant difficulties.

A further contribution is to our understanding of how practitioner-students manage the challenges of discourse adaption, and in the implications of part-time study for practitioner-students in relation to their approaches to learning. The three themes all contribute to the understanding of discourse across communities, expanding upon Northedge's (2003a) exploration of this, and illustrating how power and knowledge can be experienced across such discourse boundaries (Lea, 2005; Lea and Street, 1998). In particular, within academic literacies, the models of adapting practice discourses to align into academic settings, in Figure 4.4 and associated discussion, provide details of how this can

occur for practitioner-students, adding to Lea and Street's (1998) suggestions regarding this approach.

Finally, the research also contributes to our understanding of student approaches to learning, emphasising the significance of presage and contextual factors in the development of deep, or otherwise, approaches. This is most clearly seen in Figure 4.4, and in the discussion leading up to this. As such it responds to the suggestions that deep approaches are required to engage with discourse (Northedge, 2003a) and are related to both less peripheral trajectories (Fenton-O'Creevy *et al.*, 2015a) and stronger student identities (Bluic *et al.*, 2011; Platow *et al.*, 2013; Smyth *et al.*, 2015), proposing that the presaging context of limited time resources, and obligations to succeed, creates approaches to learning which are strategically chosen, but costly to experience.

In summary therefore, this research contributes to knowledge by offering insight into the experiences of part-time postgraduate students, closing the recognised gap in this area.

Furthermore, it nuances the views of how HRM practice and academic communities interact and are perceived, providing evidence of this in an area which has significant discussion, but little empirical evidence. It also contributes to the emerging third phase of CoP, illustrating one particular landscape of practice, an area in which very few examples exists. This in turn provides understanding of both how experience transfers within such landscapes, and how trajectories across these landscapes are experienced. In the former case, this is a recognised gap, whilst in the latter this research offers complexity to existing models. In addition to this, the research offers an understanding of how practitioner-students manage academic writing processes, and how achieving this impacts on their approaches to learning. In both cases, this adds to existing bodies of knowledge by nuancing to a particular niche cohort of students. Finally, the methodology used offers a practical contribution by providing new approaches to focus groups within IPA, offering a technique that can fill this gap in application.

5.5 Quality, Validity and Limitations

Within IPA, quality is not about generalisability, or replicability, but about understanding. A comparison is drawn between this approach, ethnography and social anthropology, where study of one community is not expected to be applicable to all communities (Smith and Osbourn, 2008, p56). Despite this, Smith and Osbourn (2008, p.56) suggest that the 'power of an IPA study is judged by the light it sheds on the broader context', suggestive that even if generalisability is not intended, the implications of IPA studies are relevant and transferable to similar contexts. However, this is a 'theoretical rather than empirical generalisability' (Smith and Osbourn, 2008, p56), and as such relies upon the linkages made by the researcher 'between the findings of an IPA study, their own personal and professional experience, and the claims in the extant literature' (Smith and Osbourn, 2008, p56). This echoes Lillis and Scott's (2007, p21) observation of the usefulness of small scale research, in that case looking at academic literacies, for the 'lone researcher wanting to engage critically with the contexts in which she is working'.

One particular aspect of this is scale. Whilst small sample research can be viewed as limited, particularly in terms of generalisability, this sample was appropriate for the idiographic and individualised focus of the study. Indeed, in terms of quality Hefferon and Gil-Rodriguez suggest that 'fewer participants examined at a greater depth is always preferable to a broader, shallow and simply descriptive analysis of many individuals, as commonly seen in thematic analysis, grounded theory or poor IPA' (2011, p.756, citing Reid *et al.*, 2005). As such the detailed focus on five individuals is both supportive of this view of quality IPA, and is in line with guidance on sample size (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.52). In terms of generalisability, further iterations of this study, perhaps with other cohorts, or in differing disciplinary areas, has the potential to produce alternative conclusions. Far from negating the findings of this study, such expansions would enhance and further the understanding gained here.

In reaching conclusions about quality, it is helpful to consider the guidance offered on this within IPA. There are several approaches, and two are considered here. Firstly, Larkin and Thompson (2012, p.112-4) set out a series of features which they suggest should be apparent in a good quality piece of IPA research. These include;

- Appropriate data collection, from appropriate participants. This study utilised semi-structured interviews (the 'exemplary' method) with volunteer participants from the relevant student body.
- Analysis which 'transcends the structure of data collection'. In this case the analysis is drawn across both focus groups and interviews, and is presented both as narrative through the case vignettes, and thematically in the analysis. The presentation of this analysis is distant from the interview schedule, that is, it does not simply follow the schedule but is grounded in the thematic analysis, another marker of quality.
- Focuses on 'how things are understood'. This study provides an analysis which looks beyond the experience itself to the implications of the experience for the learner, for example, in looking beyond the challenges of time management to the implications this has for approaches to learning.
- Presents analysis which 'balances phenomenological detail ... and interpretative work' and makes 'appropriate use of extracts and commentary to achieve transparency'. This study utilises both narrative accounts and analysis to provide a rounded account of the study and the lived experience.
- Engagement with theory. Both the analysis process and the presentation of the analysis have used a wide range of theory and literature to inform and illuminate the accounts of the lived experience, and to place these in wider context.

- Conducted with an 'engagement with other IPA work and/or phenomenological theory'. To support this, I have been actively participating in a range of forums including social theory discussion groups and the NorthEast IPA Forum throughout the study.

Alongside this view of quality, both Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez (2011, p.757-8) and Smith Flowers and Larkin (2009, p.180) recommend attention is paid to Yardley's four-fold framework of sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance.

Yardley's (2015, pp.265-269) discussion of validity is broader than IPA alone, focussing on validity in qualitative psychology, but it offers a framework for discussions of legitimacy and the authority of IPA studies more broadly. The four aspects of the framework are;

- Sensitivity to context, in particular through awareness to existing literature. This was supported during the development of the research question by an initial exploration of literature, and further developed through the analysis. This is made explicit by the atypical IPA presentation, intended to demonstrate sensitivity, and share this with readers. Yardley (2015, p.265-6) emphasises sensitivity to the 'perspective and social-cultural context of participants' through the data collection processes and awareness of the power of the researcher. The use of the consensus workshop is helpful in this, shifting the analysis into the participant's control, and influencing the research approach thereafter.
- Commitment and rigour in participant recruitment, sampling, and analysis, including careful selection of participants to attain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena. This is supported by the targeted recruitment from one cohort of practitioner-students, enabling detailed exploration and comparison. However, depth of analysis is considered of greater consequence than sampling, and so the multiple approaches taken, from participant analysis of focus groups, development of case vignettes, and systematic analysis, enable multiple viewpoints of the data and a nuanced understanding of the participant's accounts.

- Transparency and coherence, ‘partly determined on the clarity and power of the argument’ (Yardley, 2015, p.267). Judgements of this lie in the reader’s hands, but coherence between research design and analysis lie with the researcher. The attention given interpretive and idiographic presentation of the analysis through the intensive use of participant’s words supports this, and is consistent with the recommendations for IPA (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009), and is represented by the limited number of themes, suggested as being representative of ‘thorough and synthesised analysis’ (Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011, p.757). Yardley (2015, p.268) suggests transparency is supported through clear evidence of methods used, with sufficient data to make this visible. As such, the methodology explicitly outlines the approach, while Table 4.1: Analysis by Theme and Appendix 2: Emergent coding related to analysis themes together make visible the coding which develops the themes. However, the extensive use of participant quotes may be most significant in allowing the reader to enter the interpretative hermeneutic circle created between the participants’ experience and the researcher’s analysis.
- Impact and importance. Yardley (2015, p268-9) emphasises that the measure of validity is the impact and importance of the research, and the implications of this to the context of the research. It is to this that the later sections of this chapter turn.

5.6 Application to Practice

Whilst the nature of this study was to focus intensely upon a particular cohort within a particular discipline, its resonance goes beyond this. Throughout the research process I have found myself discussing this topic with other educational practitioners, and with similarly located part-time practitioner-students. These conversations have demonstrated this wider resonance, as I have been constantly struck by how strongly others identify with the experiences outlined, and with the research findings. Indeed, I frequently find myself engaged in discussion with individuals who explain how the time challenges of studying have affected their engagement and success, or how frustrated

they became at the styles of writing they were required to adopt. Most recently an undergraduate student has commented to me how, on returning from her placement year, she struggled to get back into the discourse of academia. It appears that practice discourses overwrite academic ones very quickly.

Given that the changing postgraduate funding landscape has the potential to drive growth in terms of returners and new entrants to HE from practice, such applications are significant. These students will have very similar experiences as those in this study around issues of engagement with academic discourse in contrast to dominant practice discourses, of communities, and of complex personal lives complicating the engagement they can have. As such, these students are likely to have similar issues, and the recommendations herein can therefore be viewed as informative.

Therefore, the recommendations which follow are rooted in my own experience, and are written from this viewpoint. They are intended not only to guide my own practice, but act as suggestions for other practitioners, and are intentionally adaptable to differing contexts. Indeed, I have already applied these conclusions in another context, as while I have not been able to apply these to HRM practitioner-student cohorts due to cessation of that programme, I have used these with similarly located students in other disciplines within wider management and other professional disciplines including uniformed services and medicine, with undergraduate mature entrants, and with undergraduate placement returners.

These recommendations are loosely grouped by theme, but just as these clusters interact in the experience, the recommendations are in truth are informed by the whole analysis, and so also cross the thematic boundaries presented.

5.6.1 *Theme One*

The emphasis placed by the practitioner-students on the locations of study within their wider personal context brings to the foreground aspects of student experience that could be viewed as

unimportant to overall experience and achievement, but which have profound and significant implications for these students.

There is clearly a necessity for explicit recognition of the uncertain, complex, and liminal, career positions of practitioner-students. As such, while studying may be central to career advancement, this is an extrinsic motivation, backed up by the obligations created by employer and personal funding commitment. Practitioner-students may not want to study, but instead have to. This can be recognised in the reluctant and resistant attitudes sometimes experienced in these classrooms, and awareness of this may be useful to those seeking to engage with these individuals. One technique to do this is the recognition of the experience and expertise which practitioner-students hold, supporting their articulation of this. For example, I have found encouraging practitioner-students to discuss how their career to date has led to study, and how study will enable their future development, helpful in overcoming resistance to study. This may also help in transitions towards a student identity, however transitional and temporary, making this a valid and worthwhile stage of their career transitions.

Clearly, recognition of the time and work-life balance issues of part-time study mid-career is significant. This can be supported by clear articulations of time commitments, something which is often apparent in the recruitment material for part-time programmes. However, these often focus on the student's commitments, and less on supporting strategies for this. One approach would be to encourage discussion around this with employers. Ideally, employers need to support time in excess of the teaching timetable, given the need for personal study time, but this is a complex negotiation which may require support from educators. A further discussion which needs to be planned into early stages of study is that of the implications of time for studies, in particular with regard to developing a deep engagement with their subject. While decisions on how to allocate time will be driven by the range of commitments of each individual, an understanding of how this affects their

learning will ensure that they are more fully informed. This may empower learners to make choices understanding the inherent consequences and implications.

5.6.2 Theme Two

The conceptualisation of the differing communities experienced by HRM practitioner-students offer much to those working with these students, both in terms of the locations of the individuals in communities, and in the relationships which can be fostered across these.

As with the recommendations from Theme One, the explicit recognition of professional standing and experience may well be significant in the development of positive relationships, and break down the boundaries between 'student' and 'tutor'. Alongside this, it is clear that practitioner-students value and appreciate academic staff who are able to locate themselves within practice settings, suggesting that staff who are able to do so should take advantage of this, utilising their own practice experience to create bridges between the academic and practice communities, and providing paradigmatic trajectories across these boundaries. When I have employed such an approach, I have found that practitioner-students recognise and accept the legitimacy of my experience, and also that positive relationships were quickly fostered. Indeed, this was most quickly developed when I taught part-time, around a full-time HRM career, placing myself in similarly complex time relationships.

However, maintaining practitioner identities requires a currency of practice, suggesting close engagement with practice is to be recommended for disciplinary staff who have 'crossed over' to academic communities, if only to maintain this legitimacy. For staff whose trajectories have not taken them across practice landscapes this is problematic, but as can be seen, explicitly recognising this in teaching is respected by students, albeit with a sense of caution. I have also found that since moving to a full-time teaching role, locating myself as a full-time staff member and part-time doctoral student has also worked well to create an immediacy between my own experience and theirs. This is another strategy which could be used to create these relationships.

What can also be seen is how relationships across differing student cohorts can be beneficial. This is complicated by the distance between students who have not yet gained practice experience but whose academic experience is more secure, and those for whom practice is dominant. Steps taken to overcome these barriers have significant potential benefits from the cross-fertilisation between these skills sets, but require interventions to start and develop them. Having often attempted to initiate cross-fertilisation in a class incorporating both full and part-time cohorts, I find that practitioner-students feel obliged to take the lead, creating some resentment. However, working with more established groups on projects which straddle practice and academic boundaries, drawing and combining expertise from both areas, may do much to create environments where the blurring of divisions may occur. The recommendations of Theme Three suggest how this could be achieved.

5.6.3 *Theme Three*

Given that practitioner-student experience is clearly one of a liminal straddling across the community boundaries, much can be done to help alleviate and also capitalise upon this experience. There is perhaps a lack of recognition amongst staff and students of the liminality of three-year part-time degree programmes, of the constant moving between academic and practice communities, and the unsettling nature of this. The following strategies are an attempt to recognise this complexity and to smooth the perhaps jarring transitions.

Apparent in the experiences of the participants is the necessity for recognition of the levels of academic competence in practitioner-students. Given the time which has often elapsed since prior study, it may be helpful to assume significant unfamiliarity with academic expectations, discourses and strategies, even where individuals have studied successfully at undergraduate level previously. However, a deficit based study skills approach would be unhelpful, suggesting incorrectly that practitioner-students are unskilled, rather than recognising the differing skills base they hold, and the support required to translate and transfer these. I have found that framing such discussions of expectations and practices around Northedge's (2003) models of community discourse practices has

been significantly successful in making these visible, and in opening conversations about how to negotiate this. This, combined with examples of academic discourse practices, from exemplars of previous students work to scaffolds of structures, perhaps satisfies the participants' calls for examples, offering the epiphany moment of understanding which can help with transitions. With these, practitioner-students are better equipped to consider and negotiate for themselves the challenges of crossing and re-crossing boundaries. In this feedback from academics on their developing academic discourses should prove valuable, but this can be hampered by how such feedback is presented and by the apparent necessity of attendance on campus to discuss it, something that the time-constrained practitioner-students find difficult. For practitioner-students a telephone or Skype discussion may be more appropriate and an explicit offer of such an approach worthwhile.

While study is demanding for practitioner-students it also offers an opportunity to take risks, and to express personal viewpoints which may otherwise be unacceptable or inappropriate in practice settings. Given this, the provision of opportunities to engage in creative risk-taking through academic activities, contrasting to practice constraints, can thereby create value in these differences, and in a student identity and community position. Alongside this, Theme One recommendations regarding explicit understanding of time in student approaches to, and engagement with, learning, have implications here. For example, providing practitioner-students with skills development towards effective techniques for literature engagement, from the prosaic provision of discrete, focussed reading lists targeted at distinct topic areas, through the use of e-resources to save the necessity to visit campus, to high level search techniques to enable the location of literature which supports viewpoints, create less frustrating engagement with literature. This may enable practitioner-students to present arguments which are congruent with both their practice and academic activities, are consequently more valuable to them and their learning, and less costly to their identities.

Interventions which straddle the differing boundaries between communities and between practices within communities will also be significant. One example would be in the development of assessment strategies to recognise and value the differences, and provide scaffolded approaches to negotiating and understanding them. Theme Two suggested that developing peer mentoring and group-working between practitioner-students and more traditional students would act as interventions which could foster transitions whilst valuing the differing skills sets of both groups.

Alongside these, assessments which can capitalise upon concurrency between academic and practice settings, would support alignment between the two, while simultaneously offering some efficiencies regarding time management. For example, an assessment which allows a choice of topic, structured in two parts, one designed to replicate practice discourses, and one academic, would offer comfortable and familiar practices alongside the less familiar. These would reflect differing discourse requirements, such as use of citations and word counts, thereby acknowledging different practices. However, mark allocations across the two need to be equal, belying the adage that marks follow word counts, as to do otherwise would diminish the relevance and importance of the practice discourses. Such assessments could also enable personal views to be explored without the complexity of aligning these to academic voices, or enable creative approaches unavailable in practice realities. This would resolve these discordances and capitalise upon the opportunities the parallel discourses would allow.

Combining this with the suggestion of cross-cohort groups would also enable those confident and comfortable in one discourse to exchange this expertise with those less confident, and create relationships which straddle cohort boundaries. Such an assessment would mimic the types of transfer between writing practices which practitioner-students suggest they utilise, while recognising and valuing their practice discourse expertise alongside encouraging academic practices. Whilst this is unlikely to remove the discomfort experienced across landscapes of practice, it may well help to create pathways which can negotiate the boundaries.

5.7 Future Research

While this research offers a discrete view of one postgraduate experience, there is much that could be done to expand upon this. Potential developments include the expansion of the sample to other practitioner-student cohorts, within and beyond the disciplinary area of HRM or management, and at levels outside postgraduate studies. In creating discrete insights into particular communities a broader understanding of practitioner-student experience can be comprehended, where inter-connections merge with distinctiveness, enabling nuanced and responsive interventions to be developed. To do so requires a much better understanding of these experiences, hence the need for further studies.

Part of this is the dissemination of the understanding this research has offered. To date, this has been shared at a number of conferences (see Appendix 4 and 5) but much more can be done. In part, the emphasis placed on the relevance and appropriateness of publications which cross the academic-practice divide suggest that sharing this through practitioner focussed journals alongside more academic ones would be appropriate. The CIPD journal *People Management*, or the industry online weekly *Personnel Today* could be a route for such dissemination.

Alongside this, directions which might be interesting to explore, include publications focussing on both postgraduate and professional practice students. The development of the landscapes model of Fenton-O'Creevy et.al. (2015a) could be pursued, exploring the three and four-dimensional development of the model further, making explicit the topology of the landscape, and in particular how underlying contexts affect trajectories.

5.8 Reflection on Research

IPA requires an analytical engagement with reflection which is significant in shifting from pre-conceptions of the issues inherent in any participant's account, and an understanding of what the researcher has learnt along the way (Smith Flowers and Larkin, p89), although Brocki and Wearden (2006) point out that this is often an implicit reflection, not emphasised in the text, with the role of

the researcher unacknowledged. In part this may arise from the origins of IPA in psychology, and the dominance of a positivist position in which the researcher is bracketed out. Such a position leads to a reflection on research, but not reflexivity within it.

To avoid this, a reflection upon the journey of the research project is significant in both understanding the research, and the researcher. Given that this research was driven by my own experiences of crossing the academic-practice boundaries, and questions about my own teaching practices with such practitioner-students, my own reflections upon the research findings offer further insights. In balancing these issues, this thesis therefore closes with two reflections, one from the position of the practitioner-students and another from my own perspective, about the journey. This looks at some of the choices made, and aspects of what it tells me about my own experience, and a hypothetical reflection on the participants' perspective, aimed at embodying some of what they have shared in the context of this extended piece of academic work.

5.8.1 *From the Participants' Perspective*

Firstly, how would participants view my research journey, the conclusions I have reached about their experiences, and the suggestions I have made about how this knowledge can be applied?

To begin with, they would perhaps sympathise with the experience of conflicting demands of study, work and home, and the sacrifices made. They would perhaps marvel at the quantity of reading involved, and wonder how I found the time required. Of my conclusions, they would perhaps be unsurprised. Indeed, I wonder if they would consider them to be any more than 'common sense', shaking their heads at the time and energy taken to reach an understanding of their experiences. I'm confident that they would, from their dominant management discourse viewpoint, be startled at the length of this thesis, and that they might assert that it could have been much more succinct.

Of the themes identified, given the emphasis they gave to time as a feature of study, they would perhaps welcome the recognition of this, and of the costs they experience. The views of

communities may prove initially surprising, as I suspect these are not consciously recognised, but having heard such assertions from students for many years about their views of others in their communities, would be familiar. The analysis of the boundaries between communities and the strategies taken to negotiate this may also be somewhat disconcerting, but the similarity of these experiences would be reassuring. Indeed, the focus group showed that such shared understanding of their experiences, and the commonality of experience, whilst initially concerning to participants proved to be a reassuring process. Hence these findings are likely to chime with other practitioner-students strongly.

Of my suggestions of applications to practice, Brian presumably would be delighted at my recommendations of support, but perhaps sceptical of the benefits which working across cohorts would bring. Yvonne might disagree with him, and would certainly find the suggestions about assessment strategies comforting. Polly too would perhaps welcome the balance between the practitioner and academic voice, while Grace would no doubt appreciate help with finding the sources she requires to underpin her viewpoints. Finally, Cal would perhaps find the links between the presage factors of time and funding to the outcomes and approaches to learning familiar to his own choices.

5.8.2 From the Researcher's Perspective

In looking at practitioner-students, I have also uncovered views of practitioner-academics, their alignment to practice and academic communities, and how they are viewed by the other actors in their communities. I think of myself, and am referred to by HRM academic colleagues, as a practitioner-academic, so what have I learnt about this role and myself? Much of these questions stem from the issues of being inside the experience myself, while attempting to maintain, if not a detached position as a researcher, then at least an unbiased, perhaps neutral, one.

One question is whether, when teaching practitioner-students, and in particular HRM students, I act as a 'broker' at the academic-practice boundary. To be successful 'a broker may need to remain at

the edge of a community of practice, a liminal inside-outsider constantly faced with the challenge of how to make the practice of one community relevant to another' (Kubiak *et al.*, 2015b, p.82). As such it may be that practitioner-academics can serve as bridges to straddle the practice-academic boundary which is so strongly articulated, not just in the discourse around HRM, but in the experiences of these students. Yvonne's comments on the occasions I taught her suggest that I do act as a broker, and that I am able to negotiate the gap between HRM practice and HRM academic by having feet in both camps, as full legitimate member of both. However, there may be limits to how long that lasts, as HRM practice will date and I may be seen as out-of-touch. In this my role across this boundary is perhaps only visible when I make it explicit. For example, Brian views me as an academic and researcher, not having had Yvonne's experience of me as a practitioner in the classroom.

This leads in turn a question of how I positioned myself with my participants and how that could have influenced the accounts they shared with me. It could be speculated that locating myself more clearly in their communities might have influenced what they shared these with me and how. It is possible that a strong alignment to their experiences, and to their practice identities, might have led to a more explicit unpacking of these. Perhaps, but it may also have instead led to an assumption that I understood what they meant, and so resulted in less explicit explanations of the boundaries between communities. Equally possible is that my own position as a practitioner-academic may have influenced the interpretation of the practitioner-students' views of other academics, much in the same way that the participants' views reinforce their own positions. Whilst care has been taken to present an analysis which is both reflective of, and embedded in, participants' accounts, this must be borne in mind, given the inherent nature of phenomenological research to be caught inside this double hermeneutic, despite, or perhaps because of, attempts at bracketing. It is hoped that the evidence from the participants' quotes demonstrates the care taken to avoid such presuppositions, and the attempt to offer as representative account as could be achieved.

Another choice which may have affected the research was the initial discarding of the issues of time. This arose from repeated discussion about how to focus participants' discussions on the topics which I thought I wanted to find out more about, and not the topics which are preconceived as 'hot topics' for part-time students like themselves. Time is clearly key to much of the engagements and approaches to learning used by these students, but throughout the planning stages of the projects I chose, and was advised, to focus away from this. However, far from being a peripheral grumble about the experience of part-time study it is key to understanding the complex learning situation of such students, and could easily have been the complete focus of the study. Recognising this at an earlier stage may have developed a richer understanding of this aspect. Indeed, the clue was perhaps in the difficulty in setting up the focus group at an appropriate slot, and the participants' concerns about leaving on time for their family commitments. In this can be clearly seen the problems of engaging with academic life, and the underlying personal contexts, but it took me several weeks of analysis to understand the significance of time in this context.

Finally, perhaps most significantly this research has helped me to reflect upon my own 'paradigmatic trajectory' (Wenger 1998) from practitioner to a student of HRM in order to achieve the legitimacy of professional qualification, to envisaging a future academic career while returning to my practice. I saw models of different community engagements and sought them, and in doing so crossed complex landscapes of practice. It was in this journey that my research path began, and from it I understand much more the complexities I have negotiated and the challenges which lie ahead in continuing to conceptualise myself as a practitioner-academic.

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Glossary

CIPD	Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development
CoP	Communities of Practice
FE	Further Education
Full-time	Definitions of full-time vary. In this study a full-time student is one who is studying modules worth 180 postgraduate credits over a single year. See also 'part-time'.
HE	Higher education
HEI	Higher education Institution(s)
HR	Human Resource(s)
HRD	Human Resource Development
HRM	Human Resource Management
HRM/D	Human Resource Management / Development
ICA	Institute of Cultural Affairs (see discussion in section 'Focus Groups as an Initial Stage of Data Collection and Analysis')
IPA	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
IPD	Institute of Personnel and Development
IPM	Institute of Personnel Management
ITD	Institute of Training and Development
L&D	Learning and Development
LPP	Legitimate Peripheral Participation (see discussions of Communities of Practice)
MBA	Master of Business Administration
Part-time	Definitions of part-time vary. In this study a part-time student is one who is studying modules worth less than 140 postgraduate credits over a single year. See also 'full-time'.
Practitioner-academic	A term recognising the duality of experience of academics with significant practice experience(see discussion in section 'Locating Myself in Context')
Practitioner-student	A term recognising the duality of experience of part-time practice based students (see discussion in section 'Terminology')

Appendix 1: Interview Schedule Example

Biography

- Educational
- Professional

Reasons for attending university
How funding?

Experience of transition to university
Comparing to practice?

Grades and how you felt

Moving between work and university

At work

- Talk/write about HRM - Why? How?
- Level of debate and disagreement
- Personal viewpoint
- Feel comfortable? Feel like you?

Academic

- Talk/write about HRM - Why? How?
- Level of debate and disagreement
- Personal viewpoint
- Feel comfortable? Feel like you?

Comparisons - Plot questions and critical incidents

- Similar or different?
- How do they relate?

- Using one experience in the other? In discourse?
 - complement / benefit
 - contrast / too different
 - conflict / cause problems
 - change the other
 - compartmentalised /separate

Impacts

- How university affects how you see yourself as practitioner
- Vice versa
 - Which feels like you?

Thematic themes

- Professional practice valued
- Relationship with 'other' students – speaking?
- Relationship with academic staff
- Return on Investment
- How do you write (backwards)?

Appendix 2: Emergent coding related to analysis themes

Super-ordinate Theme	Theme	Emergent coding titles
Locating study in personal context	Studying mid-carer	Changing jobs; Coping with transitions; Motivation; Professional recognition
	Locating self as experienced	Academics recognising experience; Work experience
	Locating self as HRM practitioner, or not	Recognising self as practice experienced; Recognising self as NOT practice experienced
	Locating self as a student	I'm a student; I'm more of a practitioner
	Implications of mid-career study	Costs of duplication; Doing two things, rather than one; Employer impacts; Friend and family impacts; Time and money invested
	Relevance of mid-career study	Academic and practice working well; But I want to use it at work; Expectations; It's not like it is in the real world; Reflection; Timing is everything; Using academic in practice
Relating to others	HRM practitioners / Other managers	Academic and practice working well; Academic and practice not working well; Being part of practice community; Not being part of practice community; Supportive of study; Not supportive of study; Observing the transition in reverse
	Student Community Practitioner students	Being part of the student community; PT or practitioner experienced students
	Student Community Wider student community	Being part of the student community; PT or non-practitioner experienced students; Observing the transition in reverse
	Academic Community	Academics recognising experience; Academics who combine practice and academic; Academics who don't combine practice and academic; Helpful and knowledgeable; How long have they been out of it; I could be an academic; What do they know
Experiencing academic / practice boundaries	Experiencing liminal identity positions	Doubting self; Frustration; Made me question who I am; Marks and grades; Style over content
	Observing difference	Academic and practice working well; Academic and practice not working well; Citation and underpinning; Common sense; Having own opinion: How long have they been out of it; Style over content; This is how the books say to do it; Transition from practice to academic; Using experience in classroom; What do they know; Word counts and brevity; Writing professionally
	Dealing with difference	Emergent understanding; Feedback; Flipping; Not flipping; Starting with academic; Surface engagement; Taking easier route, not what I think; Hard to define; Has lower stakes; Why can't it be more like

Appendix 3: Extended Case Vignettes

Appendix 3.1: Brian's story

Brian, now in his late forties, had a long career as an engineer, during which he also undertook additional trade union roles. He is proud of this experience, particularly his involvement as union representative in a site closure and redundancy programme, which involved him working at a senior national level. This closure led to him considering a career change to an HR focussed role, a move he reflects as atypical, describing it as his 'poacher to gamekeeper' move, a transition he found relatively straightforward.

The postgraduate programme is not the first Brian has taken to support this transition, having already completed a CIPD course at a local FE college, but rather than continue with college based studies, he viewed university as more commensurate with his experience. However, despite being keen for this step up to a higher level of study, and despite his earlier qualification, the transition proved surprising academically.

Brian drew on his practitioner experience while studying, and notes that lecturers, who he viewed as being out of the 'working world', also used the practitioner-student's experiences. Brian felt this was an attempt to improve the currency of classroom content. Likewise, Brian observed students without practitioner experience drawing on the experiences of practitioner-students. As such, Brian feels this could be developed to support these students. However, this was not a reciprocal arrangement, as Brian found he did not gain anything in return, despite being interested in different viewpoints, holding back in classroom discussions in order to hear these views.

To some extent Brian feels that the programme fails to prepare inexperienced students appropriately for employment, noting that subject content seemed out of step with his current working practices, and pointing out the significant differences in the style of writing, and the use of literature, between the two settings. Likewise, he felt university did not help him with the shift

between practice and academic writing styles. This transition between discourses proved initially traumatic, with distinct differences between the expectations between similarly named genres, such as reports. However, Brian recognised why these differences exist, and once he understood these found it easier to negotiate these transitions. He suggests that it would be beneficial to have clearer guidance on these issues. As it was, he negotiated these through discussion with his tutors and his fellow part-time student peers. These informal discussions were important for developing his academic writing style, and led to him 'switching off' his normal practice-based writing style, moving into one he felt was more suitable for university. Particular problems with this transition included the convention of citation and referencing.

Another distinct difference he observed was the purpose or intention of writing, comparing the advice role he takes in practice with a more discursive approach in the academic formats. As such he found academic writing enabled him freedom to explore different viewpoints, and express opinions unacceptable in practice. This freedom had a beneficial impact in changing how he approaches his work, and helped his confidence in his role. He also found he questioned what happens at work more, but attributes this mostly to his trade union experiences, where questioning organisational policies formed part of his remit. He also found benefit from peer experiences and discussions.

Brian emphasises the significance of the support from his family and employers over the course of his programme, particularly given the extensive time commitment. Importantly, Brian feels that his academic experience has been positive, despite the challenges and costs he faced. Alongside this, his clear ambition to achieve a senior role within HR, aiming at a national role, gave him the motivation to get through, and he sees the qualification as helping him in this aim.

Appendix 3.2: Cal's story

Cal is in his mid-thirties, and is a mid-career Learning and Development professional for a post-1992 UK university. Following his computing degree, he spent a short spell in IT, moving into an L&D role seven years ago. Over this period, he has continued to study for various professional qualifications, including more than one CIPD qualification. When his L&D team merged with HR, his employer suggested studying HRM at postgraduate level, as this was felt to be beneficial in providing knowledge about HRM with an academic underpinning, useful given his employment sector.

Cal noticed a particular congruence between his studies and his work role, making transitions between his professional practice and study quite positive. In particular, the module content often chimed with work projects, helping him develop his underpinning knowledge, building confidence, and offering models of best practice he could utilise. Studying also helped him reflect on what he was doing as an L&D professional, and how technology or classroom activities impacted upon his learners. However, despite this increasing confidence, the transition from the theoretical classroom setting into practice was less successful. In one example he recounts how, thinking his colleagues may not have been aware of the academic perspective on a work project, he shared his learning. The response was muted, with some colleagues slightly interested, but others were dismissive of practice applicability, preferring their own practitioner knowledge. This rejection of his academic HR knowledge by practice-experienced colleagues did not dent his growing confidence, and Cal understands his colleagues' viewpoint. In particular, he also felt uncertain about the applicability of some theories, given the current economic climate. This viewpoint was echoed by his peers on the programme.

Cal found the practitioner-student community, who he perceived as having strong HR backgrounds, very important. He learnt much from them, and this informal learning community continued to be valuable at the point of the interview. Cal also observed that teaching staff valued the practitioner knowledge base in the cohort, drawing on it in the classroom. This conjunction of practitioner

knowledge and academic discussion seems important for Cal, perhaps due to his acknowledged lack of HR practitioner experience. As a result, he felt more confident when his tutors could demonstrate those links by drawing on their own practice experience, causing him concern where they could not do this.

One of the reasons Cal found this practitioner-academic link significant is the importance he places on his own experience in understanding the academic material he was presented with, and he questioned how students without practitioner background would relate to the subject. Cal also found writing assignments easier if he could relate them to his practice, as this gave him an accessible entry point, and this was enhanced when his module content echoed his work projects. Cal's choice of this adaption of his practice based writing style arose from the issues he found in developing an academic style, despite his previous academic study. He suggests that this is because he has got out of practice, having not written in an academic style for some time, and had subsequently become accustomed to writing for work purposes instead. Trying to switch between these different styles on an on-going basis was also problematic, and presented significant challenges in the early stages of studying.

Cal feels that some of his experiences were related to his 'mind-set' about how much time he could devote to studying. In particular, finding the time to engage with the literature in the depth needed, whilst still balancing the particular pressures of work and family life have been challenging. He thinks this balance between study and his other commitments impacted on his marks, and while he found a balance which he was comfortable with, he acknowledges that he could have achieved more if he had time. This is significant as Cal feels his marks also offer a judgement of his professional practice, which given the context of his employment at a university, may make this academic validation more significant than it could have been. This accounts for why he is continuing to develop his academic writing style, using colleagues who are experienced in this to support this. It is perhaps that he envisages a future career as an academic which makes such competence important.

Appendix 3.3: Grace's story

Grace is a mid-career service industry professional in her late thirties. Her entry to HRM was prompted by a role change after becoming a mother. This move from her previous management career was to achieve a better work-life balance, but HR was an area of particular interest. However, once in post she found she was managing a team whose qualifications outstripped her experience. It was at this point that Grace's manager agreed to sponsor her through the same qualification. However, Grace had not anticipated the time required for study, often to the detriment of her family life. She bore these costs, anticipating studying would develop her HRM knowledge, perhaps offering future career opportunities.

Grace had anticipated studying would directly relate to her current role, but found this was not always the case, with a mismatch between her expectations and the reality of the programme content. She wonders if this was created by her lack of knowledge of HRM practice. This contrasted with the professional training in her employment, which covered much of the same content, but fitted with her practice more closely, and were more relatable.

Grace found aligning the academic content with the practical aspects of her experience problematic. She found the commonality between effective management practice and theoretical perspectives interesting, but much of this felt like common sense, given her 15 years of employment experience, whilst other aspects were not as congruent as she expected. Despite this she found her professional experience invaluable in informing her theoretical knowledge, not least in allowing her to place the theory she was exposed to into practice, albeit with a certain reticence in its capacity to 'predict human behaviour'.

Grace noticed that students who didn't have this practice experience tended to make suggestions which she felt would not work in practice, or would hold back in discussion in deference to more experienced peers. As a result of these incongruences, Grace felt the academic environment was not

being equipped for practitioners like herself, and felt that if she had known this, she may have decided against studying.

In assessments, where the topic aligned to her employment, Grace found the transfer straightforward, but other aspects of writing were not straightforward. Indeed, her practice experience initially proved problematic, as it required her to negotiate the contrasting styles between practice and academic settings. Negotiating this was a skill she developed over time, from a problematic first year to increasing success in adapting to expectations. To do this Grace found herself having to suppress her own viewpoint in favour of the theories and authors within the literature. This left her feeling that she had no voice, and she notes the sharp contrast between this, and the professional setting where experience is key. At times, the challenge of finding commonality between her own experienced viewpoint and the academic theory was too much, and Grace suppressed her viewpoint in favour of what she felt was a less problematic, and more easily academically 'backed up' viewpoint. This struggle between styles was so distinct, Grace expresses them as different personas, with the academic writing persona being one which chooses to conform to expectations, albeit one with significant costs to her workplace 'open and straightforward' approach. This apparent necessity to suppress her expert voice in favour of a conformist academic style clashed with the reasons Grace came into the university, so was highly frustrating.

This suppression was a response to feedback on assessments where she had attempted to utilise her own experience, but which had highlighted the lack of academic underpinning to support this.

Feedback like this was problematic to engage with, given Grace's complex and demanding work life balance. As a result, developing her academic writing style was undertaken independently, without significant tutor guidance beyond written feedback on assessments. Instead, Grace used resources she could more readily access, specifically, her peer group and the extant literature.

Over time, this development of her academic style, and the costs associated with suppressing her viewpoint, had significant influences on the choices she made within her studies. She chose a

dissertation topic where the mismatch between her viewpoint and the literature was not as marked, and where she felt that she could both express her ideas, and support them academically. However, even within this she experienced problems. The dissertation project is a two-part assessment, and on the first part where Grace sought academic advice, was reassured that she had written it in a way which was appropriate, and then later found that had been incorrect. This had a major negative influence on her view of the academic staff with whom she engaged.

Long term, Grace is not sure that studying really impacted on her professional practice. Given that studying was intended to build up her knowledge base, she feels it failed to do so, it is unsurprising that she was disappointed with the experience. What she does clearly express as something she has learnt, is how to conform to the academic voice.

Appendix 3.4: Polly's story

Polly, in her early forties, is an experienced manager in a major service sector employer. Her undergraduate studies were in humanities, but her career plans during this time changed, and so she took a year out. After travelling she looked for work, joining her current employer as a temporary measure. She found they offered her significant opportunities, and so remained.

She became a senior manager in a customer service role, but whilst on maternity leave decided to pursue a sideways move into HR. Recognising the need for qualifications to achieve this, she planned to fund her own studies, but an opportunity arose within HR combined with employer funding for qualifications. Whilst this sponsorship relieved the financial burden, it instead placed Polly under an obligation to live up to this investment. This came with heavy personal costs in terms of her work life balance, particularly in light of parenting responsibilities.

Some of her commitment to achieving this qualification arose from Polly's understanding of the importance of CIPD recognition for her membership of the HR practitioner community. Polly identifies strongly as manager, and feels that this combination of wider management experience

with HR is rare in her organisation, and highly valued by her employers. Polly attributes her recent promotion to this combination of her wider experience and the HRM qualification. However valuable studying is, Polly does not identify as a student, thinking of herself as ingrained in her practice setting, perhaps due to her long service with one employer. As a result, she found the transition into studying as more challenging than she expected, describing herself as 'shell-shocked' by it.

This setting of her career, and the enduring relationship with her employer is significant, not least in the discourse differences she notes. She describes her employer as having a distinctive culture and writing style, and a strong approach to maintain this. As a result, the discourse shifts into university proved problematic, as she found there was little she could transfer between the two environments. Indeed, so different were these, Polly envisages them as opposing cultures, becoming frustrated that the academic style required did not align to her practice focussed model.

The impacts of this became apparent in the feedback Polly received on her assignments, where she felt that despite a good level of knowledge, she hadn't been able to conform to the expected styles and conventions of academic writing. Polly recognises that this comes from the dominance of her practice background, bringing benefits and problems for the practitioner-student. In particular, whilst she notes her academic experience helps her to think about how she writes in her practice setting, her practice knowledge and strong acculturation may affect how she approaches academic tasks.

This wealth of practitioner experience has also had influence on how Polly has viewed the material and topics she has studied. So, while the knowledge and content covered has been a reinforcement of her professional practice, and the training she has had in her role, this has been as a refresher, rather than anything new. While valuable, Polly has preferred to keep the academic and practice knowledge base separate. Indeed, those occasions where she has attempted to combine the two have highlighted the costs of studying and working together. For Polly, the challenge has been in

attempting to make the best use of her time, choosing topics and projects which she could use in both the practice and academic setting, whilst balancing the research and reading required in the latter. However, when she has done so she has found it necessary to re-write material developed for one setting to make it suitable for the other, a process she describes as 'double work'. Her approach in attempting this was to begin within the academic discourse first, and then 'strip back' the material she felt was inappropriate for her practice setting. This balance and duplication was so challenging that she describes her final semester as 'pure hell'.

Polly feels that she was not adequately supported by her lecturers in this, and that there could have been more recognition of the potential for issues around the transitions between academic and practice settings. In addition to viewing the course as pitched at a level which failed to capitalise upon the experience of the practitioner-students, there was also an assumption that all the students were conversant with academic practice, and this proved a 'steep learning curve'. However, whilst Polly feels that whilst some of her lecturers did not really appreciate the level of practitioner experience, others very much did, and adapted their teaching more to suit. What appears to have disappointed her is the lack of consistency in this, which she attributes to differing expertise in her teaching staff. What was helpful was the support from the other practitioner-students, in particular those with more practice experience than her. She noticed this was also the case with those students with less experience than her, but in these cases she felt that she was having to lead discussions, which she found frustrating.

Perhaps the most significant factor in Polly's experiences of university, occurred during the period of the research interviews. Indeed, so significant was this that a marked change in her views was apparent between the different interview stages. Having been consistently achieving marks in the mid-sixties to seventies range, one piece of work, into which she had 'poured [her] heart and soul', had failed due to a lack of adequate supervision and support. A subsequent re-mark passed this at seventy. This apparent failure severely impacted upon her confidence, causing significant emotional

upset. Polly was surprised by the strength of her distress, which she now attributes to this happening at the same time as her promotion to a new role, and the unsettling nature of this new learning curve. Under more normal circumstances she feels she would have shrugged this off.

This significantly impacted on how she feels about studying. She recommended to her husband, who was contemplating retraining to a new career, to choose a practice rather than academic route, suggesting he would be frustrated by university study. She also felt that she now had no future plans to study again, as overall it hadn't been a 'positive experience'. It also impacted on her views of her lecturers, and their professionalism. In this she felt conflicted, not wishing to be negative about the staff who were helping her to qualify, but who had caused unnecessary distress. She notes how one module, and the assessment for that module, had felt as if it was more to the benefit of the lecturers' research interest than the student's learning.

It is perhaps in light of this, and her awareness of the significant investment made by both her employers and herself, that Polly views the university in a service delivery context. She feels her practitioner experience should have been valued, and that the university should recognise and adapt more to the distinctive needs of students like herself, recognising both her experience, and the restrictions in which she studied.

Appendix 3.5: Yvonne's story

Yvonne is in her early forties, previously graduating with a degree in technology management with a 2:2, a grade she feels reflects her commitment rather than her ability. Joining her employer whilst still a student, she progressed through various roles, with much of her career working in positions where people management was a significant feature, and she attributes her interest in HRM to this. She is now a senior manager with significant HR responsibility.

Despite her apparent disengagement with her undergraduate programme, Yvonne was interested in doing a further qualification, but swept up with employment the opportunity never arose. However,

a change in family circumstances caused by her father's terminal illness meant she needed to be in the region on a more settled basis. Having a very peripatetic role, time in the region enabled Yvonne to return to study. Yvonne felt particularly committed as she was personally funding her studies, and she hoped this would offer an opportunity for self-development which was not available in her employment. It is clear however, that she did not view this in an entirely positive light as she describes this as a 'necessary evil'.

Her original intention had been to resign from her role, but an offer of sabbatical leave allowed her to return to the region, commence studying on a full-time basis, while also supporting the family business. After her father's death Yvonne returned to work, joining the part-time cohort. The consequences of this bereavement were significant for her experiences of studying. Despite her previous university studies, Yvonne initially felt very lost, lacking the certainty of her professional career and the support of people she knew, while being uncertain about her new programme and the emotional impact of her personal circumstances.

In particular Yvonne found the transition between the structure of employment and the independence of postgraduate study strange, and she cites the strong loss of identity she felt at this time. This was partly because as she began to immerse herself in her studies she moved away from her professional setting, and this consequently impacted on her view of herself, but she also felt significantly older than the other full-time students, and that she couldn't connect on social level. She observes that her experience as a full-time student differs from that of the more usual part-time route, and that this offers advantages and disadvantages. Whilst the full-time route allowed her to 'immerse' herself, the dominance of her twenty years of professional experience in comparison to the relatively brief academic period has provided distinct contrasts, even from her previous undergraduate experiences. Alongside this, she feels she missed out on the opportunity to share experiences with other students with similar professional backgrounds.

However, despite these expectations and differences, Yvonne formed strong relationships with some of the full-time students, and they supported her through her personal circumstances. These relationships mattered a great deal after her bereavement, offering comfort and a sense of belonging. Understandably, much of Yvonne's experience is bound up in her family circumstances she was also experiencing, and she describes this period as being like a roller coaster. She suggests that this provided a 'push' to get through her studies, but her father's somewhat negative view on her return to study created conflicting emotions throughout.

Yvonne notes that the difference in experience between her own rich practitioner experience and that of her full-time peers as challenging. Yvonne found these students to be mostly lacking work experience, and she found herself amused at their naivety. Yvonne felt distant to these students, but that they would turn to her to provide a practice setting viewpoint. This meant she felt obliged to take a lead role, which she was reluctant to do, as this was not the experience she had wanted or expected. She suggests that while full-time students did not behave differently towards her, she felt different, and in some way lesser than the other students, despite her confidence in her practitioner expertise. She relates this to 'imposter syndrome' and it led her to question why she had come to university and her validity in this setting. Over time however, she developed an understanding which helped it to 'click'.

This uncertainty meant that despite her initial confidence, studying proved initially very challenging, and she experienced 'mini-meltdowns'. Key in overcoming this was the validation of good assignment grades, and thereby reassurance and 'vindication'. This led to a growing ambition and a drive to achieve consistently high marks, not simply her original aim of passing with the CIPD qualification. Key in this confidence was a module on an area in which she was very experienced, and which combined a practical assessment with a more academic writing task. She enjoyed the practical task, feeling confident and competent, but was worried about the academic task. Discussion with her student peers and one particular lecturer was significant. In particular, her

lecturer suggested she approach it as she would at work, and this seems to have provided her with a way to start. Also helpful was the opportunity to view examples of academic writing from other students, and thereby contextualised examples of writing in practice. Yvonne describes this as an epiphany moment. Yvonne had found an approach that worked for her, in particular by using this suggestion of starting with her professional approach.

This linkage to the style and approach of writing which Yvonne had undertaken in her professional practice was very significant, offering a route to tackling and overcoming the challenges she found in expressing herself. Yvonne describes writing from an initial position of practice and then moving this to an academic approach, adding theoretical perspectives to support or criticise this, as 'flipping it'. She found this gave her a way into the academic literature, and a framework on which she could begin to understand things. Yvonne describes how this allowed her to use her normal practitioner approach but 'make it look like an academic piece of work'. Yvonne absorbed the expectations and approaches of academic discourse through reading journals and online materials and building up an image of how those writers achieved this.

Despite being comfortable with adapting her communication styles at work, Yvonne found this development of her writing style challenging, particularly where she wished to present her own practitioner experience. While professionally she was comfortable to present her opinions, the academic necessity of underpinning this with appropriate evidence from literature was problematic, perhaps as this seemed a diminution of her as an experienced practitioner. However, Yvonne notes that the issues of personal voice exist in either setting, citing the suppression of her opinion to organisational view or direction in her practitioner experience. Alongside this, she found the requirements of citation challenging, and sought the help of a friend from outside the university who had also recently completed study as a mature student. With this trusted voice she was able to explore the ways in which she presented herself in her writing, and to experiment with style. Over time however, Yvonne began to feel more comfortable writing for academic purposes, and moved

away from her 'flipping' strategy. In doing this, the marks she had already received appear to have been significant in helping to feel confident.

Alongside this Yvonne found academic writing allowed her to explore ideas and more freely express herself. She developed ways to bring her own practice into her writing, and this offered a freedom which the business critical setting of her employment prevented. She describes this as having the freedom to play, both in terms of style and in terms of content and approach. This seems to have been a liberating experience.

Yvonne found that her lecturers, perceiving her to have work experience, assumed that she would be a competent student, suggesting that 'you'll be alright, because you've worked'. However, they do not appear to have offered any clear articulations of how they saw this assumedly easy transition working in practice. In turn, Yvonne seems to have found it easier to relate to lecturers who could provide practice based explorations of the topic, finding staff whose content was more theoretically based as distant to her, suggesting they were 'in an academic bubble' removed from the reality of practice.

Yvonne clearly feels strongly about the value of both the practitioner and the academic views, expressing this in her own writing, her relationships with teaching staff, but also in regard to other students. She suggests that they may not fully appreciate the importance that subsequent work experience will bring. Similarly, she notes that the while academic underpinning is significant, that 'just being a practitioner might not be enough', and for her the combination of the academic and practitioner viewpoints is important.

At no point did Yvonne's increasing academic confidence replace the certainty of her extensive work experience, and she described the workplace environment as being 'more me'. This accounts for the emphasis she places on practical experience and 'common sense'. Indeed, she expresses significant surprise that many aspects of her practice experience are contained in academic theories, relating

how she had known for years about how it worked in practice, not realising that it was also an academic concept, and suggesting that such theorists were 'getting paid for common sense'.

What the academic experience did was to reinforce her confidence regarding her practitioner experience, which she suspects she had previously undervalued. Studying therefore helped Yvonne to recognise the potential for progression her experience offered. However, she doubts that her employers would similarly value her academic knowledge, given the lack of recognition or interest shown by her managers. As a result, she chooses not to discuss this with her colleagues, but suggests that she has found ways to bring this into the workplace, in part by applying the knowledge without making explicit reference to it. Despite this transfer, Yvonne feels she that she maintains a distance between her work and academic worlds.

Yvonne remains cautious about how her academic experience will be of benefit in the future. She had intended to begin freelancing as an HR Consultant, but since completing her course expresses curiosity about an academic career path. She is tentatively interested in undertaking a PhD, although she is cautious about the time commitment required. She is also considering a possible future academic teaching career, emphasising that she would want to bring her practice experience into the classroom, and bring these two strands together.